

## **Eddie (Since You've Been Gone) by Ourladyofresurrection**

**Category:** IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

**Genre:** Angst, Cuddling, Eddie's not dead, First Kiss, First Time, Fluff, IT Chapter Two Spoilers, Internalized Homophobia, Love Confessions, M/M, Mentions of homophobia, Movie: IT Chapter Two (2019), Post-Canon Fix-It, Reddie, Reunited and It Feels So Good, Richie Tozier/Eddie Kasprak - Freeform, Richie is mourning and in love with Eddie, Slow Burn, Takes place three weeks after the final battle with IT, the happy ending we all deserve

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Adrian Mellon (mentioned), Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Don Haggarty (mentioned), Eddie Kasprak, Pennywise (IT), Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

**Relationships:** Adrian Mellon/Don Haggarty (mentioned), Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Beverly Marsh & Richie Tozier, Bill Denbrough & Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough/Stamley Uris, Eddie Kasprak/Richie Tozier

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**Summary:**

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“Richie,” she said breathily, voice sounding shaky, like how it was when she told everyone Stan was dead.

Richie sat up straighter, curiosity piquing as his heart thudded wildly in his chest.

“Richie, I—“ she started, and made a faint sniffling, choked-off sob sound over the receiver. He heard her take a deep breath.

“Richie,” she said shakily, “I think Eddie’s alive.”

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Three weeks after the Losers’ final battle of IT, Richie has been struggling to come to grips with Eddie’s death, ruminating over the one that got away and the truth he’d never been able to confront.

Then Beverly has a vision that Eddie is still alive and trapped in the sewers, and his past resurfaces.

Conflicted by joy over seeing Eddie again and wrestling with his own repressed feelings for him, Richie realizes that he must confront his own secrets, no matter the cost.

That is, if Eddie even makes it out alive

## 1. Chapter One

Richie stared out into the empty canal, not unlike how Don Haggarty had dazedly staggered down the spill of rocks to rescue Adrian just three weeks before. The spot where Pennywise had stood that fateful night, however, sat empty and hollow— the grass matted and flat with rain. The only hint of the event was a single deflated shell of a red balloon, strewn in the grasses like morbid tinsel on a Christmas tree. The sight made Richie sick, and yet he couldn't bring himself to discard of it— watching it taunt him from across the water.

He made an excuse to himself about not wanting to provoke It, but he knew it was null. It was dead, right alongside Eddie, and there was nothing in Heaven or Earth that could possibly change that fact.

Truth be told, Richie was keeping everything in the state it was three weeks ago, back when they first reconvened after 27 long years at the Chinese restaurant. Back when the horrors seemed mountable. Back when Eddie was still around.

It felt wrong— felt wrong to move anything. Felt wrong to stop coming down here because one of these days, Eddie— oh, Eddie , was going to march down here to this shitty canal and tell Richie exactly how many diseases he was currently exposing himself to. And everything would be okay again. And it would be just like it was when they were kids— him and Eddie bickering back and forth, Richie trying to not let it show on his face as he fell impossibly deeper in love with him.

Richie needed to be there when it happened. And if he was waiting for a day that would never come, well, that's nobody's fucking business except for his own.

There exists only a certain level of insanity one can be exposed to before the suffocating walls of reality are breached forever. There is no going back from that— seeing the other side of the coin. There is no going back from dethroning God— that's the thing. Because once He falls, He is nothing more than a human— measly and small and spitting up dirt like everyone else. Maybe God was a human after all. Maybe complete power lied within the self.

Richie's parents would have spanked him raw, had he smartly proposed that idea the summer of 1989, clinging perhaps more tightly to their Presbyterian beliefs than to their own son. It's a lonely thought— being truly alone on the Earth. Even atheists, deep down inside, would tremble at the genuine, overwhelming face of being utterly on your own in the universe. And the things Richie had seen...well, they were the kind of things that either drove a person towards God, or utterly away from Him.

Richie hadn't figured out quite where he fit into that yet.

All Richie knew was that there was a natural order of things, and for good reason too. The Earth revolves around the Sun, and every morning that sun comes over the horizon, clear as day. The tapestry of bright lights in the sky are flames. The Sun burns there too. Mondays were always shitty and Rock and Roll never went out of style, and with each inhale and exhale of the Earth, life prospered and covered every inch of it like a plague. And beneath the surface of Derry, in the deep, rotten stink of the dark, It lived. Watching. Waiting.

And above all else, where even logic failed to reach—he loved Eddie. He loved him so much it hurt. He always would. It was as certain as

the sun rising every morning and setting every night.

These were just some of the truths Richie Tozier had come to accept over the years— some sooner than others, but all just as true. And like humans did best, he adapted. His life was now governed by these rules, and yet— ceased to be changed by them. Of course, he would never forget the face of It deep down inside, a person always remembers the face of their greatest fear, no matter how hard they try not to. But life moved on. He got a job, and nobody was more surprised than him when he discovered he was good at it. Great at it, even. He moved to California, miles and miles away from that old town of Derry, and he learned to forget.

And all of that was shattered in an instant the minute Mike Hanlon picked up the phone that fateful night.

It takes a lifetime to build a world for yourself, and only a single moment to break it.

And that was just another unfair, horrific truth Richie Tozier had come to learn. Just like that— his sanity taking a nosedive, fleeting entirely somewhere between the moment he first remembered Derry to the moment he couldn't bring himself to leave.

*No wonder Stan killed himself*, Richie thought.

And he wailed to himself— *if there can be entities older than any human stalking the sewer pipes and things that lurk in the dark, why can't there be life after death?* Who the fuck is anyone to say that Eddie can't be right next to Richie right now? Who are they to deprive him

of that?

“Who the *fuck* are you?!” he yelled.

The river gurgled in response, lazily lapping at the sun-bleached base of the grey bridge as it flowed on, as if oblivious to the horrors that had transpired in it over the years.

The water looked black and endlessly deep— like whatever sat behind It’s haunting white eyes. The small ripples in the water and quiet bubbling sounds were the only indication it was a moving, breathing thing. The sound revolted him.

*How dare you, Richie thought lividly, how dare you carry on living like everything’s okay when Eddie’s dead.*

He thought back to that moment in the quarry, when the remaining Losers had gathered around him in the water, clutching onto his arm and making jokes. Jokes— like now was a time for those, if ever. He remembered how Ben and Beverly boarded a yacht, petting their pet dog— fur curly with water-drops as the sun went down on them, only to rise the next morning.

*How fucking nice for you, Richie thought bitterly, perhaps a little unfairly, do you know what I would do to see him again? Hold him again?*

Richie couldn’t help but feel like the sun set on him the moment Eddie’s last breath left his gaping mouth, and he hadn’t seen it since, left shivering and alone, looking for the golden line across the

horizon, waiting for the only warmth he'd ever known to return to his life.

It was exceptionally chilly down by the canal, the sharp salt-kissed breeze abrasively cool against his face as he stared blankly over the horizon. In a moment of mad impulse, he wished Pennywise was standing on the other side of that canal.

"Where are you now, fucker— *huh?*" he yelled, "Why don't you come on out and do that little jig of yours? Sing about my *dirty little secret*," he spat.

"You're not the first fucker in this town who wants to kill the fairies, you know," he yawped, "you're not original, bimbo! You'd think after this many years you'd think of something more creative!"

He knew he shouldn't be talking so loudly about the boy he loved. Even if Pennywise may be gone, there existed a kind of undeniable evil surrounding Derry that had nothing to do with It. Perhaps that was even more horrifying than the monster itself. Richie could feel the trepidation coiling tightly in his stomach before receding like a tide, like an iron glove closing around his insides and squeezing. He kept waiting for It to appear, to come kill him. Punish him. *Taunt* him.

But he was only met with the sound of silence, and the beginning snuffles of a floodgate of tears building behind his eyes.

"You can't *hurt me, asshole*," he wailed hoarsely, the sound resonating statically from his throat, "you already ripped my heart out, you

fucking clown bastard. You hurt me worse than dead when you took him away from me.”

“...And you knew,” he murmured, voice the special kind of quiet that only showed up when one was teetering over the dizzying precipice of hysterics, “you *knew*,” he repeated, sobbing.

He fell to his knees, forehead lolling against the grass as he beat his fists onto the ground like a child having a temper tantrum.

“He’s all I ever wanted, you know,” he sobbed brokenly, tone almost nonsensical in his despair, “why couldn’t you have taken me?”

For the hundredth time that night alone, Richie’s pleas were met with utter and dead silence, which somehow felt more disrespectful than anything that could be said.

Richie slammed his fists against the ground until they were mud-caked, aching and bleeding, “Why not *me*,” he wailed into the night, “why *him*, oh God no, *please not him*.”

The wind whistled as it cut through the night, crickets chirping in the distance. Life in Derry carried on.

Richie laid down in the dirt and cried.

He must have been there awhile— time seemed to melt and slip away



lately, and he'd stopped bothering to wear a watch. He didn't need another reminder of how long Eddie has been gone. He didn't need that sliver of hope to see the setting sun just yet. He broke out of his trance when he felt a vibration in his jean pocket, radiating up his leg. He briefly wondered if his leg had gone numb, having the same kind of staticky feeling, and then deduced his phone was ringing when he heard his stupid ringtone.

He fumbled for his phone, sniffing as he swiped the back of his hand under his nose.

He looked at the caller ID:

*(incoming call from Chicago, Illinois)*

Bev.

He scoffed, shaking his head as he shoved his phone back into his pocket. He really didn't need another Loser-Gang pep-talk, not right now. Not ever. The phone stopped ringing and fell still. Richie breathed a sigh of relief, easing back into his previous position.

Silence.

And then the phone started ringing again.

“For fuck's sake—“ he grumbled, tears prickling in his eyes in

frustration, clumsily pulling out the phone.

He adjusted his glasses, which had pressed into his face from lying on the ground, and shakily pressed *'accept call.'*

“Look, Beverly. I don’t need you to check in on me—“ he started.

“Richie,” she said breathily, voice sounding shaky, like how it was when she told everyone Stan was dead.

Richie sat up straighter, curiosity piquing as his heart thudded wildly in his chest. He heard a creak on the other end of the line, and he figured that must be Ben shifting on the bed, waking up, followed by a small click he immediately attributed to a bedside lamp being turned on.

“Richie, I—“ she started, and made a faint sniffing, choked-off sob sound over the receiver. He heard her take a deep breath.

“*Richie,*” she said shakily, *“I think Eddie’s alive.”*

## 2. Chapter Two

Eddie woke up cold, alone, and very scared.

He took a wheezing gasp as his eyes flew open, landing blearily on the familiar grey-blue ceiling of the sewers. He keeled over onto his side, coughing as black mucus left his throat, dribbling wetly over his bottom lip. He retched a few times, body trembling with the effort as his hands struggled to steel him upright. He didn't want to lay back down in fear he might slip back into a coma— is that how it works? Who cares. The point was, Eddie didn't want to.

But like his ever-coaxing mother, his own crippling weakness romanced him back onto the cement floor, head swimming from the sudden movement.

He screwed his eyes shut, trying to rid of the small white circles in his field of vision— the kind you get after waking up from a long nap, but much more solidified. He let out a wheezing breath, the kind that would normally make him reach for his aspirator— that small blue vessel that fit perfectly in his pocket like a lifeline. He ached to feel that familiar sickly-sweet battery acid taste as it filled his lungs.

His aspirator— where was it? He shot up, reaching blindly for it, patting down his jean pockets. The realization dawned on him like a flaming sun— He had thrown it into the fire. The Chüd ritual that was supposed to save them from It. That was his sacrifice.

*Some good that did* , he thought dizzily, head lolling back as he willed the room stop spinning, hands closing instinctively over his knees as

he tried to gather his bearings.

*God, I wish Richie hadn't taken that damn aspirator out of my hand, he thought.*

*"You're braver than you think,"* the words echoed sweetly in his head.

He scoffed at that, disrupting a heavy weight on his chest, and he coughed loudly.

*Not brave, Rich. I stood in the corner and cowered as that thing almost mauled you. You could have died.*

His chest constricted and protested at the damp air and his growing panic. He clutched his chest.

*"Not brave, Richie, not brave. I'm not brave enough, please Richie, please,"* he cried, panic rising in his throat.

He let his eyes fall closed as tears prickled behind his eyes, his stomach one big twisting, convulsive knot inside. Richie had always protected him when they were kids— especially after coming face to face with It. He fondly remembered one time, just a week after they had emerged from the sewers for the first time, all seven of them intact and present.

Some asshole had jumped out from around the corner, startling Eddie

as he leered down at him with unsmiling, cruel eyes. Eddie screamed — not so much out of fear of the bully, but who— or rather *what* he thought it was. He had still been waiting for It to come back, even after they'd seen him shrink defeatedly back into the sewers. The paranoia still resonated strongly within him. Maybe he always knew, deep down inside, that it wouldn't be the last time he'd see the clown's unforgiving eyes.

Richie had jumped in front of Eddie, swinging a punch at the guy, having the height advantage Eddie lacked due to his lanky stature, even at age thirteen. Amazingly, his fist collided with the guy's cheekbone, blood erupting awesomely from his jaw, spilling over his lips. Richie himself looked surprised, but above all else, he looked livid.

*Livid.*

A word he would struggle to find, only to realise it was exactly how he looked that day. *Why?* he wanted to ask Richie, *why were you so mad, Rich?*

He never did get a chance to ask him, however, because at that moment, Richie got his own punch to the face, his bruised lip swelling up nastily as he cried out, struggling to get away. Eddie stood frozen, watching numbly as blood started to spew from Richie's mouth, mingling with his saliva as it dripped anticlimactically to the ground. A car could be heard turning around the corner, and the boy gave Richie one last hook straight to the eye before taking off, clutching his crooked-looking nose.

A few minutes later, Eddie and Richie were crouching outside the pharmacy, much like they had with Ben, Stan, and Bill earlier that

summer when Ben Hanscom fled from the Bowers gang. In his hand, Eddie held a pack of ice, which he pressed tentatively under Richie's eye. "You're damn lucky I have a tab here, Trashmouth."

"Yeah, yeah, my *hero*," Richie rolled his eyes, "hey Eds, did'ya tell Mr. Keene to give you a refill on Mrs. K's birth control pills? 'Cause she's gonna need those."

Eddie just rolled his eyes, used to Richie's teasing by now. He did, however, mash the bag of ice harder against his cheek in retaliation. "That is so fucking disgusting. And don't call me Eds."

Richie just looked at him, grinning as his eyes sparkled, glasses beside him on the pavement, "Ah, you know you love it."

Eddie didn't respond to that, instead pressing the ice-pack firmly against Richie's cheek. He did hate it...but he also liked it a little too.

Now, more than ever he wished Richie was there with him.

Eddie pulled his knees up closer to his chest and began to cry.

### 3. Chapter Three

Richie felt his heart stop in his chest as his blood ran ice cold, “Bev,” he said shakily, “this isn’t funny.”

She paused over the receiver, and Richie could tell by her tone of voice as she proceeded that she was hurt, “Richie, I wouldn’t joke about this. I know you l—“

She cut herself off, and Richie flushed, cheeks fiery red as he realised was she was going to say. She continued carefully, taking in a sharp breath, “I know you...cared about him, a lot. You two had a special bond—“

“What?” he said, trying to sound amused, but his traitor voice gave him away as a whimper escaped from the back of his throat. He coughed. “Don’t know about Eds, but Mrs. K and I sure had a connection—“

“Richie ,” Beverly interrupted.

Richie’s quip died on his tongue, and Beverly persisted, sounding tired and *scared*, “My point is, Richie, we all care about him. I wouldn’t make this up.”

The funny thing about wanting something you know you can never have, is that when someone tells you that you can, you won’t believe it. You’ll protest it with such hatred and *fear* in your voice, as if you don’t dream of having it every night, as if you don’t want it so much

it physically *hurts*. Because we all keep our safety blankets, and sometimes we fall in love with shadows of people because we think we don't deserve the real thing— couldn't *handle* the real thing.

Richie spent his entire life being told he couldn't have Eddie— the reasons were mounting. He couldn't have Eddie because boys don't like boys. He couldn't have Eddie because best friends don't look at each other like that. He couldn't have Eddie because Eddie was gone and he wasn't ever coming back. And he was miserably comfortable in this truth. And now he could have Eddie? It felt like a cruel trick. A taunt. Coaxing him to reach out and grab his hand, only for him to be ripped away at the last second, and then everyone would know his *dirty little secret*.

Having Eddie seemed too good to be true. So Richie did what he did best— refute.

“So let me get this straight— Eddie's alive? Because he looked pretty dead when he was lying li—“ Richie's voice cracked. He took a breath before trying again, voice raising, “when he was lying lifeless in my arms.”

Richie had the phone in a death-grip. He was pacing now like a caged lion, or the lion's prey watching the beast get closer and closer to him while all he could do was watch and hope he could run faster than his own heart and his own debilitating fear...His fist clenched and unclenched sporadically beside him.

“Richie, I can't explain it,” she said softly, and he felt guilty. He was being an asshole, he knew it. But he couldn't find it in him to make his humour good-natured right now.



“Yeah,” he said, laughing drily, holding the phone to his ear as he stared up at the moon, “join the club.”

He heard a soft sigh on the other end, and he was willing to bet that Hanscom had her wrapped in his arms right now, comforting her, burying his face in her *January embers* hair. He had the love of his life beside him, and *nothing* could change that. Richie felt a twitch of envy deep inside his stomach, climbing up his throat as grief reared it's ugly head, yanking at his heart.

“Look,” she said, “I’m not telling you it’s a definite thing. Just...sleep on it, okay? Call me tomorrow...we have a lot to discuss.”

Richie bit his lip so hard it bled, his mouth tasting coppery as he swallowed harshly, “Okay,” he breathed, fight drained out of him as he suddenly realised how tired he was. “Okay, Bevvv.”

Over the phone, Beverly couldn’t help but notice he sounded almost childlike as he said that, much like he had immediately after Eddie died. She felt her heart soften a little, anger ebbing away.

“Take care, Richie,” she said softly, “I really hope this works out for you...”

Richie felt tears sting his eyes for the second time that night. He hung up, and started to walk back alone.

## 4. Chapter Four

*[Three weeks earlier, two days after the final battle with It, the gang is checking out of the townhouses, packing up their luggage as they prepare to leave Derry for good. On the tartan couch, Beverly and Bill are talking in hushed voices]*

“ Think he’s gonna go back home?” Beverly asked him quietly, nervously fiddling with a dainty gold bracelet fastened around her wrist.

“Honestly?” Bill said, hands coming to rest on the knees of his jeans, which had seen a lot this week, “I don’t think California is his home anymore.”

They exchanged equally sympathetic glances. The situation was nothing if not extremely unfortunate. Sickeningly so.

Eddie was *always* his home— California was only ever a surrogate for him. Richie was reunited with it, finally, only to now come home to an empty house.

It just wasn’t fair.

Bill and Beverly exhaled sharply, silent tears starting to fall from her blue eyes.

“Think we could have saved him?” Beverly asked softly, “I mean...could we have?”

Bill took one look at her face, the absolute picture of self-reproach. He craned his neck to try and meet her gaze, which was lowered, placing his hand comfortingly over her own, “Hey, hey— Bev. We c-cuh-couldn’t have done anything m-m-more for him,” he said, voice understanding but stern.

She looked blearily around the room, blinking tears away as she sniffled, “I can’t tell if that makes it better or worse.”

“I know,” Bill said, squeezing her hand, “I know.”

“Do you think he’s going to stay in Derry?” she whispered, leaning against his shoulder.

Bill looked at her funnily, the answer clear as day to him, “Wouldn’t you?”

Beverly’s plane ticket back to Chicago felt offensive in her shorts pocket, but she knew that’s not what he meant. The rest needn’t be said.

*Wouldn’t you if it was the love of your life?*

As if on cue, Richie descended down the stairs, luggage a dead

weight in his grip as he gazed blankly at the peeling wallpaper.

*Eddie would have hated that, he couldn't help but think, "Do you even know how many germs are on wallpaper, Trashmouth?"*

"H-Here, let me get that," Bill said, snapping him out of his train of thought as he jumped to his feet to collect the luggage.

"No!" Richie yelled, pulling the suitcase protectively against him. With a twinge of his heart, Bill realised it was Eddie's.

"I...I've got it..." he said softly, looking miserable.

Bill nodded, stepping out of the way, knowing better than to argue with him right now. He looked like a kicked puppy— downright pitiful. But the Losers respected Richie far too much to ever bestow such a grievance as pity upon him. Richie wheeled the luggage outside, placing it in the trunk before sitting the driver's seat of his car, and beginning to cry.

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*[Two hours after the Losers packed up their luggage, at the airport. Beverly's flight is about to start boarding, and they're all exchanging goodbyes. Everyone has a plane ticket in their hand, waiting to leave Derry, everyone except for...]*

“Richie,” Beverly said to Bill as he hugged her, “do you think he’s going to be okay all by himself?”

He pulled back, looking at him standing a few feet away, staring mutely at his shoes.

He sighed, “He’ll be okay, Bev. You know Richie...”

“Not like this we don’t,” she whispered, “this isn’t *our* Richie. I haven’t seen him this upset since he got kicked out of the Aladdin for being too loud and he missed the screening of *The Thing* .”

“Bev, he *did* just lose his b-b-best friend.”

“I know ,” she said plaintively, “that’s what I mean. We’ve never seen him experience anything close to this, so we can’t say how he’s going to react.”

Bill knew she was right. They didn’t know what was going to come out of this. This wasn’t Richie. Everyone in the group had a very specific role— it’s largely the reason why they worked out so well. Richie’s thing had always been his humour, but without Eddie, he seemed to be unable to find humour in anything. To anyone else, they might assume that since most of Richie’s jokes were directed at either Eddie or his mother, the decrease in his humour after Eddie died would be natural.

But the Losers knew better.

Maybe Richie's thing wasn't humour, maybe Richie's thing was always just *Eddie*. Eddie brought out the best in Richie, so why wouldn't he have the power to take it away from him too? With this new change, Richie's body weighing heavier on the world with insurmountable amounts of grief, and that permanent smile on his face gone, the Losers were looking at a stranger.

Richie was a shell of a man, and all they wanted to do was comfort him— but how could you comfort a whisper of a man when he was too fragile to touch?

Bill looked away. For the first time in his life, for the first time since he was appointed the unofficial leader of the Losers club, he didn't know what to do.

*Maybe Richie wasn't the only one losing himself.*

"You're right," he said, voice gravelly and defeated, "we don't know."

Beverly stared heart-brokenly at him, and then enveloped him in another bone-crushing hug, "Thanks for everything, Big Bill," she whispered into his neck.

"I wish I could do *more*," he said back tearfully.

After a moment longer, they separated, and the rest of the Loser's gave her some comfortable space as her gaze trained on Richie.

"Richie?" she said softly.

Richie looked up, looking as if she just derailed a very deep train of thought.

The thing about grief, is that your thoughts become a sort of railroad — stopping and picking back up at certain times. Sometimes someone will get on the train with you, but most times you're just alone.

There are other people on that train, but you pay no mind to them besides the occasional glance, barricaded in your own cabin because nobody could *possibly* feel the way you do. The thing about grief is that it becomes a daily commute—passing the world by through a blur of tears and stretching out before you like a carpet. Gradually, the time it takes to get to where you need to be becomes quicker, and you can ride the train through while hardly noticing you were even on it in the first place.

But what you don't understand while riding it, is that grief is so often like a cul-de-sac. You'll go around and around on the same path, licking the same wound until you drive yourself mad.

Beverly derailed that train of thought before he could crash.

She opened her arms in offering, and Richie's face crumpled before

he walked forward and leaned heavily into her touch. Her hair was like a siren, flaming red and seducing his previous inhibitions out of him as it enveloped him in the sweetest feeling. Richie let his head dip into it a little longer, feeling his heart wail as the touch sent an array of rocks skittering off his chest and into the chasm he so terribly feared.

Richie pulled away.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay all alone, Richie?” she asked him again.

He couldn’t bring himself to be mad at the question— not when she was looking at him with such love and care in her eyes.

He must have hesitated too long, because she tentatively added, “Me and Ben— we have a guest room, you know. Or Bill, or Mike...” the word 'Stan' ghosted over her lips before she stopped with a look of horrible realisation, "we'd be more than happy to accommodate—“

“I’m fine,” Richie cut in.

Beverly pursed her lips, eyebrows drawn close, a conflicted look on her face.

“Really,” he said, patting her on the shoulder, where a white Ship n’ Shore blouse flowed daintily over her collarbone, “thank you, Bev. But I’ll be fine.”



*I hope he will,* Beverly thought, *God, I really hope so.*

“Okay,” she said softly, conceding despite every other instinct that screamed inside of her, “just know the offer always stands, if you ever reconsider.”

Richie left out a breath of relief, feeling a wave of gratitude wash over him. He hugged her once more, briefly, “Thanks, Bevv.”

He smiled smally at her, and she heard her flight being announced for boarding over the intercom.

She looked at him apologetically, “That’s me.”

Richie nodded, the small pocket of time popping, throwing him back into the familiar arms of his own mind, “Have a safe flight, Bev.”

She started to walk towards her terminal, before pausing, turning on her heel.

“And, Richie?”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Keep in touch.”

As Beverly clutched her ticket tighter in her hand, making her way towards a new life, Ben in hand, she couldn't help but pray that Richie would be alright in that house all alone, because she knew all too well about the things that creep out in the dark.

## 5. Chapter Five

Beverly had been right— it was hard to be in a house all alone with all his friends hundreds of miles away and the love of his life practically six feet under.

*Except he wasn't six feet under, because he never got a proper burial. His body was left lying lifeless in the bottom of some shitty-ass sewer to rot.*

Richie keened, clutching the blue aspirator in his hand in a death-grip. He had always kept an extra one on him as a kid, just in case Eddie ever needed it and ran out of his own. He remembered the exact moment he first got it.

It had been a particularly hot summer— the summer when the Losers first banded together, in fact, and Eddie had already suffered an asthma attack down at the Barrens the day Ben Hanscom came floundering down the river, belly engraved with Henry Bower's initials. Bill had carried Eddie in his arms to the pharmacy, which was thankfully only about half a kilometre away, his heaving body gasping for air as he clutched tightly onto Bill's arm. Richie had been more terrified in that moment than he'd ever been— eyes trained nervously on Eddie as he waited for the last breath to leave his lips.

The moment fortunately, never came, and Bill dumped Eddie onto the ground, against the brick wall outside Keene's pharmacy as he rushed inside with the rest of the Losers.

“ Richie ,” Eddie gasped, holding out an arm, Richie turning on his heel to look at him.

“Yeah, Eds?” he asked, hurrying over to him, worry painted over his face.

“Don’t—“ his eyes rolled back for a minute, “don’t leave.”

Richie’s heart felt like it was being tugged by an anchor at the plea, and he sunk to his knees in front of him, “Never, Eds. I won’t leave you, not ever.”

Had he been able to breathe any more than a few shuddering gasps, Eddie might have rolled his eyes, smacking him on the shoulder and saying, “Stop being sappy, Trashmouth.”

But all he did was reach for Richie’s hand and squeeze it in a death grip as he tried to let some air into his lungs.

Looking back, Richie might have first fully realised his feelings for Eddie in that moment—crouched outside Keene’s pharmacy, an incredible burn in his legs, and an even more incredible burning in his heart. If Richie’s other hand went up to cup Eddie’s cheek at that moment, none was more the wiser, because at that moment, Bill came rushing out of the pharmacy, tossing Richie the white paper bag filled with Eddie’s medicine.

As Bill rushed away to go help Stan with Ben, Richie hastily tore open the bag, pulling out Eddie’s inhaler, popping it in his mouth as he pulled the trigger.

Eddie gasped in a breath as the familiar battery-acid taste filled his lungs. He had never been so glad to taste that bitter cloud of medicine than he had at that moment. His death-grip on Richie's hand relaxed to a gentle squeeze as his chest settled, eyes clearing up and face gaining back some colour as he started to breathe easier, a contented sigh leaving him.

His grip on Richie's hand melted into simply his own fingers locked between Richie's, and Richie realised at that moment that they were holding hands.

"Feeling better, Eds?" Richie grinned, but his heart was pounding in his chest.

"Yeah," Eddie said a little breathlessly, looking at their joined hands with an unplaceable expression.

They locked eyes for a moment, and Richie felt his heart making a break for it, crawling out of his chest and into his throat where it pulsed frantically. His cheeks burned bright red, and he knew Eddie surely had to have noticed.

And then Bill came running back over, the rest of the Losers in tow, naturally. They followed Bill blindly like a compass— they would follow him to the ends of the Earth, or right off a cliff.

Eddie especially, who looked up to him as a kind of father figure.

His eyes lit up as he saw Bill approaching, and their hands untangled themselves, dropping back limply to their sides. Richie felt his heart twitch, like the anchor tugging on his heart was allowing gravity to humble it as it sunk slightly.

Richie forced on a smile, tapping into his persona like he always did around the Losers, “So, Haystack,” he said to Ben, “still leaking Hamburger Helper?”

He remembered that moment clear as day— having forgotten it in the twenty something years since he’d left Derry, but had it come crashing back into him like a riptide the moment he saw Eddie again. His mind may have forgotten, but the heart never does. The heart has a way of being painfully resistant to letting memories slip, Richie has found.

An unforgetting heart and an amnesic mind— what a cruel combination. You were left reeling from a wound you couldn’t even place.

He supposed it explains why he would always feel drawn to the pharmacy booth at the store, or why he had an inhaler tucked into his pocket despite countless reassurances from the doctor’s office that he didn’t have asthma. It explains why he still kept it snugly on him at all times in the pocket of his jeans, hand flying to it before a big gig, or whenever he felt nervous. He remembered that day at Keene’s pharmacy was the day he realised he could never let anything happen to Eddie— he made a promise.

He had stolen Eddie’s inhaler, he recounted. Slipped it into his pocket

one day after he'd left it to dry in the sun at the quarry. It was a split second decision, one minute it was on the rocks, and the next it was in his pockets, heart in his throat and a lie on his tongue. Eddie had noticed rather quickly, and Richie had ragged on him in the way Richie always did.

"You sure you didn't chuck it into the quarry?" he had grinned, walloping him on the shoulder.

"Yeah, asshole," Eddie had responded snippily, "I threw my lifeline into this shitty water. Why the fuck would I do that?"

"You tell me, sweets. Maybe you had a moment of rebellion."

"No, I didn't!" Eddie bitched, still searching in his pockets for the blue inhaler, as if it would magically turn up.

"You're right, you wouldn't *dare* rebel."

"Shut the fuck up, Trashmouth."

Richie held up his hands in surrender, "Easy, Eds. I'm just a concerned citizen."

Eddie had rolled his eyes, hands resting on his hips.

“I mean—“ Richie continued, “I have nothing against carrying you over to Keene’s pharmacy bridal-style again, but--“

“That wasn’t you, dipshit, that was *Bill* who carried me,” he paused, licking his lips before adding, “you’re not strong enough to carry me.”

Richie had gasped, clutching his chest with his hands, “Eds— you wound me.”

“Good ,” he responded, frowning.

Richie had smiled a shit-eating grin, and before Eddie could protest what was going to happen, he was being lifted up into Richie’s arms.

“Let me down, asshole!” he had screeched, kicking his legs as his face went red.

Richie had just smiled, putting him down as the rest of the Losers came into view, Eddie’s inhaler a comforting weight in his pocket.

When Eddie had gotten a new aspirator the next week, Richie tried not to grin too much as he said, “How irresponsible of you, Eddie. Losing your inhaler,” tsk’ing at him.

“Shut up, dickwad,” Eddie had shot back at him, Richie dissolving into laughter as he started to attack him.



The warmth of the memory receded like a tide, leaving Richie shivering, like he was soaking wet in a snowstorm. He groaned into his hands, leaning into the cool press of the metal button of the aspirator against his cheek.

It was nights like this alone that the ache in Richie's heart took a hold of him and refused to let go.

Richie's grief was like a fire—he could smell smoke pouring in through the vents, feel the suffocating heat clinging to his skin like a straitjacket. His mind seemed to melt inside his head, pouring out of his eyes in the form of ashy tears, his chest constricting like a noose. The fire alarm sat next to him tauntingly, ultimately within reach, but he couldn't bring himself to bring his fist up and shatter the glass standing between him and salvation. Because then the rain would come, and everyone would come rushing in to take him away again, while he could only watch as the flame he found purpose in fizzled out forever.

His love for Eddie was like a wildfire, and even after his death, he was still coughing up smoke.

His lungs were burned and his body was tainted but he wouldn't have it any other way. It felt like a brand onto his skin— as sure as Richie had carved his and Eddie's initials into that bridge all those years ago, Eddie left a mark on Richie that never went away.

And he didn't want it to .

Because forgetting means leaving and every mile he gets further away from Derry is not distance he's putting between himself and It, but distance between him and Eddie. And Richie couldn't bear to be any further apart from him.

"I really hope it's true, Eds," he whispered, "I really do."

*God, please let it be true.*

Richie scrubbed his hands over his eyes, blinking away a wave of exhaustion as he pressed the inhaler to his lips softly, reaching over the bed and turning off the light.

That night, he fell asleep with the aspirator still clutched against his chest as he fell into a restless sleep.

## 6. Chapter Six

*[A mere three blocks away, about ten feet underground, Eddie Kaspbrak is just beginning to wake up for the second time in the sewers, the final traces of a sweet dream leaving his mind as he twitched in his sleep.]*

“Wha— Richie?” he murmured, sitting up, hair dishevelled and falling over his face.

His mind still reeled from the pocket of warmth and safety— that dream. He could almost see Richie’s shit-eating grin, his stupid coke-bottle glasses, hear his laugh and playful, “Heya, Eds. Havin’ any good chucks lately?”

Eddie groaned as he realised he was still in the sewers, and in a moment of blind impulse, egged on by the image of Richie in his mind, pulled himself to his feet.

“No, Richie,” he said to himself, looking around the small, dank room, “not been having too many good chucks down here.”

He tentatively reached out and brushed his fingers over a section of the damp wall, before remembering where he was and cringed, retracting his hand and wiping it on his pant leg. He kept them there on his hips, blinking as he stared up at the impossibly high ceiling. It was like the world’s grittiest, God-less cathedral. He stared at the murky water pooling in the corners of the room, mysterious stains painted over the walls— a damp weight to the air that made his lungs creak in protest.

“God, my mom would be so pissed right now,” he wheezed.

He was starting to wonder if he caught some kind of brain-eating amoeba down here— seeming a little too okay with this whole back from the dead/stuck inside a literal shit-hole deal for his liking. He shivered, thinking of the doctor’s trip he was going to have to make. For the first time in his life, he might actually get diagnosed with something instead of the doctors just yelling at his mother. The thought was enough to make Mrs. K turn in her grave. Eddie could practically hear her wailing, *“Eddie-Bear, you can’t leave me! It was those punks you hang around with, wasn’t it? They did this to you, Eddie!”*

Eddie shivered. Yes, the idea of going to the doctor’s office terrified him. That is, if he ever even got out of here.

Motivated by the thought and not too keen on the way his mother’s voice seemed to echo off the walls of the bare room, he started to walk.

The sewers under Derry were dizzyingly large despite how barren they were, as if to allow room for evil to breed, branching off like roots of a tree. Spider-web cracks took up the better portion of the grey cement walls, and Eddie shuddered, remembering It’s true, arachnid form. He tried not to breathe through his nose— the dank air was cold and filthy, seeming to coat his tongue with some kind of grimy film as he muttered to himself.

*God, he’d never wanted to shower so badly in his life.*

He stumbled around the various unidentifiable totems strewn around the room like a child's toys, sticking out awkwardly like stalagmites. The mere thought of anything jutting out of the ground that could impale him was enough to send an icy shock of horror through him, blooming a sickly-warm wave of nausea through him.

*He had been impaled, how the hell was he still alive?*

He tucked his chin to the collar of his shirt, rucking up the hem of it as he felt blindly for his wound. The wound—as he found out with a pained gasp, was still there. It was a stinging, gaping slash through his pale skin, pebbled at the edges and nasty enough to make a soldier keel. Heat seemed to pulse like a heartbeat around the area, and as his fingers slipped over his hip, he could feel a jagged cut—what must have been the exit wound, closing up into a raised scar. He winced, whimpering a little bit at the back of his throat as he slid his shirt back down, the pain seemingly magnified now that he'd seen the damage.

Eddie had never been good with injury—you'd think after spending countless days at hospitals on account of his mother's frantic pleas, only to be given a clean bill of health, without exception, every single time would have made him used to the idea of being hurt.

But it didn't.

Eddie was beginning to realize that nothing in Derry really worked out the way it should.

If anything, his mother's paranoid mother-bird parenting had only been a catalyst for the life-long fear he would develop, of being hurt.

He was always waiting for that moment— the moment for her to swoop in and rescue him before the elusive threat could get to him. He never stopped waiting. But now she was gone, and as much as Eddie resented his mother, there was no denying that he had become somewhat dependent on the shelter she'd built for him.

Bullshit or not, it had been all Eddie had known for most of his life, and it seemed to bleed through his past, into his present like a spilled bottle of ink, tainting what lay before him. Without his mother, who was going to swoop him up and save him when the hawk came for his throat? Would he just lay there cowering, wishing for anyone to be the hero but him.

*He wasn't the hero type, he firmly decided, heroes don't get scared and heroes don't get soft, and heroes most certainly don't cry for their mothers.*

*"I'm a lover, not a fighter,"* Richie's voice crooned in his mind.

Despite everything, Eddie found himself laughing fondly at the memory.

Richie had discovered classic rock that summer, and was particularly fond of The Kinks, because of course he was.

"You only like them because of their name!" Eddie had protested, aggressively picking at a strand of grass in the Barrens.

“How do *you* know what kinks are?” Richie had asked, before grinning, “You into some freaky shit, Eds? Like to be spanked and called a *bad boy*?”

Eddie was aghast at this, turning bright red as he screeched, “*No!*”

“Oh,” Richie said, the same shit-eating grin plastered over his face, “I get it— you like to be called a *good boy*, then.”

“No!” he yelled, nose scrunched up scrutinizingly, “I don’t like to be called *anything!*”

“Eds—“

“And I *especially* don’t like being called Eds.”

“Aw, Eds,” Richie had cooed, slinging an arm around his shoulder jovially, “it’s all a part of life on this big, dumb Earth— life flows on, and people *just get kinkier*.”

“*Richie!*”

“That’s right, Eddie, say my name!” he said goofily, tilting his head back in laughter as Eddie tried to scramble away from him, face twisted up in horror.

“That is so disgusting, Trashmouth.”

“Awe come on, you love it, Eds,” he had grinned back at him.

Eddie had roughly jostled him with a push to the chest, starting to walk away.

“Hey, Eds! Wait up!” he heard Richie call.

And despite everything, he found himself laughing fondly that day, begrudgingly accepting Richie’s arm slung around his back as they navigated through the fields.

He bit his lip at the memory, a small smile spreading across his face.

He found the door and gripped the doorknob, taking one last look at what was supposed to be his grave, before stepping out into the dark, empty waters of the sewers.



## 7. Chapter Seven

Over a thousand miles away, Beverly was restless.

She paced the small guest room of her and Ben's flat, the wood boards creaking occasionally as the ball of her foot made its rounds around the space. She glanced over at the wicker-framed bed, wishing offhandedly that she'd been more firm on Richie staying with them.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Richie ending up like Stan.

She didn't see it the way she had with Stan all those years ago— that terrible sense of knowing that there was nothing she could do to stop it. That there were forces at play bigger than all of them. This had nothing to do with the power of It, and perhaps that was the most terrifying thing of all. That perhaps there existed monsters that couldn't be vanquished, not under these circumstances, not right now. Circumstances where bravery does not defeat life's greatest adversaries, but put a sickening end to them worse than the tribulations of living with them

It was this uneasy feeling of trepidation, like she was the only one brave enough to see the forest for the trees. Everyone acted like they were out of the woods; in the clear, like it had all worked out.

But it *hadn't*.

Plagued by nightmares, Beverly struggled to reconcile her own

intuition and the denial grief brings into something sensical and concrete. It was in that struggle that she found herself floundering in that darkness- drowning, screaming. And suddenly, it felt like she'd never even escaped the sewers at all.

*What if Eddie was really dead? What if she just gave Richie false hope?*

The thought made her stomach churn, sending a fuzzy feeling through her head as she short-circuited.

She let out a cry of frustration.

And then she was being pulled into Ben's arms.

He held her close, tucking his chin snugly atop her head, bracketing her in with his big arms. She relaxed by a fraction of a difference.

"You're thinking about Richie, aren't you?"

She sighed feather-light, a whisper in the wind— almost lost to her ears in the thickening silence, and her own deafening thoughts. She leaned into his touch with the ease of someone who wasn't afraid of falling.

Ben held her with the ease of a man who was prepared to catch her, every single time. He spent years loving her— and not once had it dwindled. Not once will it ever; he loved her endlessly and

continually, every single day of his life, as he would until his very last. He made sure to voice this to Beverly, who nuzzled in closer to his neck, his stubble scratching softly against her face.

“I know, Ben,” she said tenderly, “but it doesn’t feel fair. Why should we get to be happy when—“

“When he doesn’t?” Ben finished.

“And *Stan*,” she whispered, hot tears starting to swim in her eyes.

She thought of Stan— the gentle Jewish boy with a profound love for things as ordinary as birds. Stan who could identify a night-tangle from a finch with his eyes closed. Stan who carried that battered paperback bird book with him everywhere. Stan with his smile as bright as sunshine— sparkling hazel eyes that crinkled up at the corners when he laughed— the best sound in the world, his curly hair like a halo around his face. Stan who so valued simple things, and even at a young age saw beauty in places most people neglected to look their whole lives. Stan who loved his wife, more faithful than anyone could imagine. Stanley who liked to do puzzles in his spare time and enjoy a glass of red wine in the evening.

Stanley who gave and gave and only asked for one thing in return— for nothing to threaten, for nothing to *offend* his natural order of life.

And they couldn’t even give him that.

Beverly took a shuddering breath, and then she started to cry.

“It’s not *fair*, Ben.”

“I know,” he whispered into her hair, cradling the back of her head as he held her close. He fought back tears of his own as he remembered his friends. He’d loved them all. He let her cry into his shoulder for a few minutes, until the sobs dispersed into sniffles, and she was leaning heavily against him, head lolling to the side.

He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

“You can figure it all out tomorrow, but for now, come back to bed,” he murmured.

She sniffled, wiping away her tears with the back of her hand, nodding, “Okay,” she whispered, and let herself be lead back to their room, falling into a dreamless sleep.

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*[Six hours later, at the Hanscom residence. Beverly has just awoken from a disturbed sleep, standing in the kitchen, still in her pyjamas. She held the telephone loosely in her hand, debating whether or not to call Richie. She was considering retreating back to bed when...]*

Ben walked into the room, dark brown hair falling over his forehead

in a single stray curl, stomach taut and impressive beneath his loose grey t-shirt. He had also just woken up, and looked soft in the morning light. He ambled over behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and pressing a single kiss at the back of her neck.

“Hey,” he said, voice still gravelly with sleep.

“Hey,” she said back softly, looking conflictedly at the phone in her hand.

“Richie?” he asked, giving her some space, clamping a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Ben, what if I’m wrong?” she whispered, a strand of auburn hair falling over her cheek. She pushed it away, tucking it behind her ear, “I can hardly tell what is a vision and what’s just a dream anymore,” she trailed off, whispering, “I can’t even remember what I’m starting to forget.”

Ben tilted her chin up, looking at her sternly, “Hey. You can’t do any more than what you’re already doing. Nobody would blame you...”

The sentence had words left unsaid, but Beverly knew what he meant.

*Nobody would blame you if Eddie was actually dead and you rebuilt that fragile cathedral of hope, only to crush it in front of them once again, the way the Neibolt house encroached on Eddie's limp body that day in the*

*sewers.*

Beverly wasn't so sure.

"What if Eddie was actually gone...for *good*?" she said, so softly it was almost lost to Ben's ears.

"For Richie's sake," Ben said, "let's hope we never find out.

He placed the phone firmly back into her hand. Beverly took a shuddering breath, and started to dial Richie's number.

## 8. Chapter Eight

*[ Back in Derry, Maine, Richie Tozier sat on the porch of his old childhood home, which he had inherited from his parents a few years back. His phone sat pointedly beside him, and his eyes kept flicking to it, expectantly, nervously. Richie...]*

—Blew a cloud of smoke towards the early morning sky, the sun just barely having risen from the horizon. He coughed, making a face as the ashy taste filled his relaxing lungs.

He'd hadn't quite gotten used to the taste again.

It had been a good twenty seven years since he'd last smoked, and even then he'd only done in occasionally, whenever he managed to swipe a pack of Camel's from his dad or bum some off of Beverly, who took them like a champ.

He had never really liked the taste— it always left his tongue with some kind of sandpapery film, and the smell always clung to him like a second skin. Eddie had always hated it, turning his nose up in disgust whenever Richie would strike a match, lighting the end of it as grey smoke filtered through the air.

“Do you even *know* how many diseases you can get from doing that?” he would ask.

One particular time, Richie smiled around the cigarette, puffing a small cloud of smoke from the end, as he said, “Do *you* even know

how many diseases I could get from doing your mom? I'm a risk-taker, Eds, I like to play the odds."

Eddie, clearly unsatisfied by this answer sent him a death glare and said, "Yeah, well. Your odds aren't looking too good right now, Trashmouth."

"What do you m—" he only managed to get out before he was being tackled into the grass by a very miffed Eddie Kaspbrak.

"Woah," Richie said, looking up at him from underneath those stupid Coke-bottle glasses. His mouth twitched up into a grin, "hiya, Eds."

His hand naturally slipped up to smack a hand over Eddie's hip, resting it there casually.

Eddie was red-faced and livid as ever as he said, "Get your hand off me! And don't call me E—"

Richie had interrupted him by blowing a cloud of smoke into his agape mouth, his cigarette long since lost in the grass following the tackle. Eddie hauled himself off of Richie, keeling in the grass as he coughed violently, spit dribbling from his lips, squawking out various expletives as Richie cackled on the ground.

"I have asthma, you dickwad! You could have killed me— is that what you want?"



“Well,” Richie had said, “yeah. Because then *I* could be Mrs. K’s *baby boy*.”

Eddie had hacked once more saying, “Beep, beep, Richie,” the cigarette still smouldering in the grass.

Richie looked at the smoking end of his cigarette now, thin wisps of grey filtering lazily through the air as he neglected to put it to good use.

*Eddie would have hated that*, he thought offhandedly,

And he thought, maybe the reason why he picked up smoking again was *because* Eddie would have hated it.

As a kid, he only ever really did it once out of curiosity. Everything following that was done just to get a rise out of Eddie— because how dearly Richie loved hearing him bitch at him. Tell him how sick he was making himself. It was some of the only times Eddie ever expressed an outward sense of care for him. It was like spending all that time down at the quarry nowadays— he felt that, in an offhand way, by doing the things Eddie would hate most, it would bring him back, because it was just the way things *worked*; Richie did stupid things and Eddie swooped in to stop him. Time after time, again and again. It had become one of the only constants in Richie's life, and he soon found himself governed to that pattern- orbiting it like a sun, licking over the same gag until it was nonsensical, if only to get a fond look in return and just a piece of that incredible *sunshine*.

He'd always joked that him smoking a cigarette would be enough to make Eddie turn in his grave, but it wasn't funny anymore.

*Some fucking luck it would be if that were true, wouldn't it, Eds?* he thought.

"Wouldn't it, Eds?" he murmured, taking a sip of his coffee as he peered over the horizon, where the sleepy town was just starting to stir.

*Some luck that would be. What a good chuck, huh, Eds?*

Suddenly, his phone vibrated on the chair beside him, nearly falling off the arm. Richie caught it before it shattered against the wooden deck, tentatively looking at the number as his heart came to a dead stop in his chest.

*[Incoming call from Chicago, Illinois.]*

His hand shook as he lifted the phone to his ear, nearly dropping it for a second time as he took a deep breath, "Hello?"

"Richie," Beverly said, "it's Bev."

*I know*, Richie meant to say.

"Eddie," he said instead.

“Eddie...” Beverly trailed off, “look, Richie. It’s not a for sure thing, but...”

Richie’s fingers twitched beside him, the butt of his cigarette burning the pad of his fingers. He hardly noticed, fighting the urge to tell Beverly to speak faster, dammit.

Just as he was about to say something, she said quietly, “You remember my dreams?”

“Dreams,” he parroted, before the memory crashed into him like a twenty foot wave, “your dreams! Yes, I remember.”

His foot was tapping nervously now— not unusual for Richie at the best of times, but the tic seemed to worsen since Eddie’s death. Like he couldn’t stop moving or the grief would consume him whole.

“It’s like...these visions,” she said with the hesitance of someone trying to mentally string together their own thoughts as they speak.

“Vision? Like the kind of visions those bullshit psychics give out at carnivals for a dime?”

Beverly huffed into the receiver, and Richie cringed, sensing her scalding frustration thousands of miles away, as bright red and fiery as her hair.

“...Sorry,” he muttered.

Beverly, like the saint she is, continued on, “No, not like those. These are real— at least it seems like they are.”

Richie huffed, taking a long drag of his cigarette, closing his eyes and tilting his head up to the sky. It seemed like every step they were going forward in this discussion, they promptly went two steps back.

It was utterly redundant.

Still, he remained patient. He loved Beverly, and even within that outer space littered with grief and broken memories in which he was floating— orbiting Eddie and his desperate longing for him, a deep understanding of Beverly’s own grief existed, and it was in that understanding that he found himself able to reconcile his own agony with the deep love he had for everyone else that had been in blast radius the day the bomb dropped and Eddie died.

*Losers forever*, the words echoed in his ears, just as powerful as they had been twenty seven years ago.

Beverly started to speak, “You know when we left Derry for the first time— the first time we defeated It, and all of us slowly started to forget about each other?”

Richie nodded. He remembered all too well— that sense of forgetting, but not remembering what he was forgetting in the first place. Like it was on the tip of his tongue.

He must have unconsciously voiced this to Beverly, because then she was exclaiming, “Exactly!” in his ear.

Richie recoiled.

“It’s like...like I’m remembering,” she said, “remembering something I can’t recall happening...I’m sorry, Richie, I know it sounds crazy—“

“No, no,” he said, “it’s makes sense.”

And it did — every one of the Losers was acquaintanced with that odd feeling, and the familiarity sent a rumble of hope through Richie’s body.

Because that feeling was directly linked to Derry, and whatever lived in Derry didn’t necessarily abide by the common laws of the universe.

Richie’s fingers tapped a beat against the back of his phone.

“The same way I was able to tell Stan was dead...” Beverly started, “I...I’m able to...to tell—“

“That Eddie’s alive,” Richie finished, voice breathy and soft- like someone who is just beginning to rouse from a warm sleep, the final dredges of morning poring over their skin.

“Richie,” she sighed, “we don’t know.”

“Well, what do you want me to say, Beverly?” he said, voice rising dangerously as he rose from his seat, the noise startling a curious glance out of a little boy riding past on his tricycle, “That he’s *dead*?” he hissed.

“No!” she cried, “I’m not asking you to say *anything* . All I’m asking is that you listen and try to *work with me*...for Eddie’s sake.”

It was a poor choice of phrasing on Beverly’s part, brought on by her own growing trepidation and Richie’s sheer anguish bleeding through the phone that had a way of putting everyone at a loss for words.

“Oh, for *Eddie’s sake*?” Richie laughed mirthlessly, voice turning hysterical, “*Now* you’re deciding what’s best for Eddie? You guys left him to die in the sewers!”

“There was no other choice, Richie!” she cried shrilly, voice thick with emotion, and guilt. So much *guilt*.

His voice raised to the breaking point, letting out a heaving dry sob, sounding a lot like Eddie when his inhaler ran out, “You should have let me stay there with him.”

The true meaning behind his words was left unsaid, but Beverly understood what he was saying anyways:

*You should have left me to die there with him.*

“At least this way you have a *chance*,” she pleaded, Richie pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration.

The true meaning behind her words was left unsaid, but Richie understood what she was saying anyways:

*You have a chance, Richie. A chance to see Eddie again. Don't you want that?*

He took a deep breath, wiping away hot tears before saying, “Okay, then are you guys all coming back to Derry?”

Beverly hesitated, and in that pause, Richie felt his heart cave in like the Neibolt house had on Eddie— that anchor attached to his heart sinking further and further from the sun, out of the blue and into the black. He shivered. Life was callous and so goddamn *cold* without Eddie in it.

“Richie, I've already decided that I'm going to come down. I have to — I'm the one with the vision. I'm the one who got you into this.”

Richie waited with bated breath as she slowly continued.

“Ben has already agreed to come with me, but Richie...I don’t know about the other Losers. Derry isn’t exactly a happy place for any of us, and given what we just went through, I don’t know if they’ll want to come back.”

*A happy place? Richie thought incredulously, Eddie doesn’t have a fucking choice. He’s in the town he hates in a dirty sewer that he would hate so much it makes me want to cry, because I know that he would if he knew. If he knew...*

“Oh, well that’s *nice*,” Richie said, “what ever happened to ‘Losers stick together’? We can fuck right back to Derry when *Bill* says so, but when Eddie *dies*, who gives a shit, right?”

“Richie—“

“Real fucking *nice*,” he yelled, slamming his hand against the railing.

He hardly noticed the dull ache it sent shooting down his arm— it was nothing compared to the raging inferno inside his heart.

“I’m flying out tomorrow night,” Beverly said quietly, “I’ll do my best to try to convince the others. Richie, that’s the best I can do...”

His breath hitched, and a warbling sob choked up from his throat, lip



trembling much like it had for Bill the first time they'd gone into the Neibolt house looking for Georgie, a speech of bravery on his tongue, one that would reunite them and *empower* them, except Richie had never in his life been so lost for words.

"Every second we're not all together again is another second he's down there alone ," he said shakily, with more conviction in his voice than ever before.

"Richie—" she said softly.

Richie snubbed out his cigarette on the white railing of his porch, grabbing his jacket, "I'm going to go find Eddie— *alone*."

"Richie!" she protested, but he had already hung up, walking towards the sewers with more determination than he'd ever had in his life.

With or without the rest of the Losers, he was going to bring Eddie *home*.

## 9. Chapter Nine

The pathways branching off from the single-cell room where Pennywise took its victims to die, and later be consumed were dizzying and nonsensical— like the frantic scrawls of a schizophrenic.

Eddie was relieved to find that just as it had that fatefully summer of 1989, that internal compass within him had once again begun to tick.

It had always been one of his greater virtues— likely brought on by all that time he'd spent locked in his house with more than enough idle time to kill, when he had one day discovered a pocket compass nestled neatly in his father's work desk. He had fiddled with it for days— learning true North and all the ins and outs of the mechanisms, fascinated by the spinning dial and rusted bronze chain that hung from the top of it.

In the few days that Eddie had it— he loved it dearly. He hardly had anything relating to his father but sob-stories recounted by his mother after she's had one too many glasses of wine, or when an anniversary would pass.

To Eddie, his father was nothing but the sum of the terribly tragic things his name had been raked through over the years.

But that compass? It was the first moment Eddie really stopped to consider his father as a solidified person he could touch and love and miss, rather than just another tool of guilt-tripping abused by his mother. He was fascinated by the way tears would brim behind his eyes, crying for a man he never got that chance to know, but loved all the same.

Of course, all all good things do, this came to a devastatingly quick end. Upon discovering him with it one day, Mrs. Kaspbrak had promptly whisked it away, yelling something incoherent at Eddie before bursting out into bubbling tears. Eddie remembered crying too, feeling as though he'd just lost the last remaining chance to truly connect with his father. From then on, Mr. Kaspbrak was nothing but a ghost in Eddie's eyes- cold and distant as she floated in and out of his life, her empty eyes haunting him as she asked, *'don't you trust me, Eddie? Don't you know I only know what's best for you?'*

Richie had been furious when he found out about that compass, Eddie remembered faintly.

The compass or not, that internal sense of direction remained within Eddie, and if he believed in beautiful divine things such as God, he might have called it a miracle, a gift. But God was a spiteful, hateful man to Eddie. His mother only brought Him up when Eddie did something she disapproved of.

*' Don't hang around that Tozier boy, Eddie. He has a foul mouth, and cussing makes you go to Hell!'*

*'Don't hang around that Jew, Eddie. God hates Jews. You don't want God to hate you, do you, Eddie?'*

*' Don't hang around that Marsh girl, do you know what she does to boys, Eddie? Premarital sex is a sin!'*

*' Don't hang around that negro— no son of mine will be seen with people like them!'*

*‘Don’t hang around that fat boy! Gluttony is a sin, Eddie!’*

*You may not fear the extent of my punishment, Eddie, but you would beg to abide my rules if you knew how God would feel about the things you do.*

A favourite of hers once Eddie began approaching that awkward hill of pubescence was, *‘don’t go running around with girls, Eddie!’*

On one occasion, Eddie had just stared at her blankly and responded, “I don’t want to run around with girls.”

Clearly, that wasn’t the answer Sonia was looking for, because a kind of horrified, twisted expression passed over her face that Eddie couldn’t understand even to this day.

He’d been locked up in the house for a week after that.

It wasn’t until Sonia outright insulted Richie that Eddie finally snapped, his rebellion taking the form of him storming out of the house, and spending the day at the quarry with the Trashmouth in question. Mrs. Kaspbrak had been beyond herself when he finally returned— defiantly covered with dirt and grime, a lingering smile on his face. Eddie has just kissed her on the cheek, and went to take a shower.

Looking back, that was probably the first time he ever stood up to his mother, soon followed by the ‘gazebo’ incident that would shape his life.

Eddie may have spent his whole life getting told what to do, but as he found out, he was pretty damn good at figuring things out for himself when he was given the opportunity to.

Eddie smiled, and waded through the murky water.

It was nearly up to his waist, soaking uncomfortably through his pants, and he dimly remarked that his balls felt like they might freeze off.

*Castrated by the sewers*, he thought hysterically, laughter bubbling up in his throat at the absurdity of it all.

“I’m honestly just surprised *you* didn’t castrate me first,” he said, seemingly to no one in particular. But he knew he was speaking to his mother, in his own way. Even though there was no sight of her pink, plump face in this desolate sewage system. Even though she was five years expired.

“Oh, you would hate this,” he snorted, “your precious *Eddie-Bear*—balls as hard as rocks against his legs as he wades through shitty water. What a life, eh, Ma?”

Mrs. K, understandably, did not respond. Eddie, quite happy with this outcome, trudged along.

There was hardly any noise in the sewers, besides the distinctive wet dripping sounds as raw sewage dripped grossly from the circular

frames of the various tunnels. Eddie stepped into one of them without thinking, letting his intuition guide him as he looked around.

*Yeah, there really wasn't much here at all.*

It wasn't empty in the way the Barrens were— with heavy forestry and rough grasses that were nearly as tall as you and cut like a bitch across your knees. Barren in the sense that it seemed to be devoid of people, of rules, of *governing*- besides the steady, true orders of Bill, that is. No, it was just utterly dismal— like no light or sound could escape it. Like one big, wet black hole.

'Oh, so like your mom's vagina, Eddie?' he heard young Richie's voice say in his ears.

"Shut up, Trashmouth," he heard himself saying, with no real bite behind his words. His mouth twitched up into a small smile as he navigated through the darkness.

He wondered what Richie was doing now.

## 10. Chapter Ten

Richie cringed as his foot sunk into the cold water of the canal, soaking through his white socks and the cotton outside of his shoes, plastering his toes together in one chilly stump. His hands clenched instinctively, and he grit his teeth as he ignored every instinct he had to simply step out of the water and go back home, where he could mope, maybe smoke another cigarette and halfheartedly watch a rerun of Golden Girls.

But then he thought of Eddie— probably scared shitless as he woke up alone. He thought of him endlessly roaming the dark, decrepit tunnels of the sewers until he collapsed for good this time, and the idea was enough to make his heart lurch, and his foot take another step forward.

*Just another step, Rich, he told himself, another step and then one more. Just keep going.*

He fell into a kind of monotonous pattern of slowly hobbling towards the big, cut-out sewer entrance, and didn't focus on anything else but putting one foot after the other until he was standing within the circular opening.

It was at that point that he turned around, taking one last look at the blue sky above him, for what could very well be the last time.

*Was it worth it? he thought to himself, was it worth it to risk losing everything in pursuit of something so unfathomable even that last dwindling spark of wonder and belief seemed to extinguish under the crushing weight of it all?*

And then he thought of Eddie— Eddie with his stupid short shorts that drove him insane and his dumb inhaler that he honked on like it wasn't actually just water laced with camphor. Eddie with his small body and delicate face that was deceptively fragile— when he was perhaps the strongest of them all.

Eddie with his stupid 'lover' cast and wild eyes. His constant bitching and the way he talked a mile a minute when you really let him. The only person who could out-talk even Richie.

The way his nose would scrunch up when he was disgusted, which was often, most typically at Richie himself. The way he made Richie laugh like nobody else, even if it was mostly at his expense.

He thought of the boy with glittering eyes and a fast mouth that would make his mother ashamed, the boy who was endlessly devoted to his friends, often sacrificing his own wants and needs for their sake.

He thought of the boy who made it so hard to leave, time and time again.

The boy who grew into himself eventually, although he was still endearingly vertically challenged. The boy who literally chose the most boring job in the world and married a whale of a woman that looked so much like his own mother it was both hilarious and so Eddie.



The boy who, even after twenty-seven long years, still hated being called 'Eds.' The boy who, even after all this time, remained Richie's first and only love.

"Nothing could ever not be worth it for you, Eds," he whispered to himself, "not a single thing."

And with that, he stepped into the dark, rank mouth of the sewers, and this time, he didn't look back.

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*[Roughly forty minutes later, deep within the winding tunnels that run under Derry, Richie Tozier is beginning to approach the middle half of the sewers. Unbeknownst to Richie, Eddie is mere miles away, and has just walked through the entrance to a tunnel going the opposite way.]*

Richie was cold, miserable, and fiercely determined.

His hair hung limply over his forehead, slick with condensation and the toll it took on his uncoordinated body to trudge through miles of water against the current. The dim lighting didn't do much to settle his nerves, setting a slow, nervous pace as his heart threatened to beat out of his chest. He waded through the disgusting waters, noting the various objects strewn along the ground like capsized ships, spilling out onto the slick, desolate land in one disheartening, premature end.

There was an alarming abundance of various items of clothing— all slumped together in disgusting, sticky piles, fabric over-stretched and unnatural in shape as they floated along.

A rusted pair of roller-skates. A stray, cracked doll-head straight out of a horror movie. A dead flashlight rolling along the concrete floor. Richie took inventory of each token that drifted past him, like if he could identify it, the suffocating unknown wouldn't feel so horrifically imposing.

He even saw a lone pair of lace panties bob through the water, a similar bra in tow. Before, Richie might have laughed, said something like:

*Got a hot date tonight, Pennywise?*

—or something of equally as dumb variety, but he couldn't seem to find it in him today. There was no longer anything funny about *It*.

He hated *It* with his whole heart, because *It* was the one who took Eddie away.

He just looked at the litter miserably, sick and tired of wading through pure filth. The sewage drenched through his pant legs and seeping coolly over his skin was growing itchy and raw— the urge to scratch it almost unbearable. Sweat plastered his shirt to his sore back, muscles protesting as his nerve endings singed and burned beneath his pulsing skin, animated by his palpitating heart with each step he took.

He came across a porthole opening latticed with iron rods, leaving only three-inch-by-three-inch openings between the grates.

Beneath the sour, ever-present smell of the sewers, there lay a strong scent of gasoline, Richie noted with a frown. He looked down at his feet, looking through the still water, making out a small silver lighter laying at the bottom.

A chill ran down his spine— as cold as death's touch. As unforgiving as a brutal winter's wind. The kind of frigidness that soaks through your bones and into the very core of your essence.

Richie reached into the murky water, and felt a hand brush against his own.

He screamed, recoiling. The action flinging him backwards into the water as he scrambled against the lead-like weight rippling through the sewer banks and over his legs.

He landed with a sickening splash, the water not nearly deep enough to drown him, but deep enough to soak his jeans entirely along the better half of his shirt.

His hands gripped through the slimy water like vises, wound uncomfortably tight as his nails raked through the concrete, a scream ripping through his lungs. The waxy hand drifted across the grey water in a deliberate, lazy manner, blue-green veins spidering across the white-splattered knuckles.

Attached to the hand was perhaps a sight even worse.

He followed the hand to the forearm to the junction between the shoulder and neck and was met with the grinning, sleazy face of Patrick Hockstetter— or what was left of it, anyway. His pale face was waxy and dull, black eyes staring up at Richie with horrifying conviction. Like he was fully confident he could kill Richie, even from beyond the dead.

Richie felt he could too.

That seemingly permanent sneer he'd had in his living days remained etched onto his face, small slashes of red at the corners of his lips, where the skin was raw and flaking. His teeth gleamed muddily, winking in the dim light. His stringy brown hair was plastered across his forehead, which was covered in horrible boils that trailed down the side of his cheek and onto his chin, where a gaping, pulsing wound sat sorely embedded into the skin.

He could practically hear Patrick's taunting voice breathe hotly over his ear.

*Where you goin—*

“— Fag,” he remembered him drawling, black eyes empty and endless as a cruel smile ripped through his face.

He had been flicking a lighter on and off in his hand— a compulsive

gesture meant to exhaust pent-up, uncontrollable energy Richie could empathise with.

Him and Patrick were both live-wires in a human disguise, only, while Richie's warmed for Eddie alone, he seemed to get burned by Patrick's every single time.

"Oh, fuck off, Hockstetter. Go blow your dad."

Patrick looked gleeful at this— and that alone had been the moment that Richie realised there was something very wrong with Patrick.

As he slunk towards him, Richie found himself, not for the first time in his life, regretting his words.

"You think you're real funny, huh, Tozier?" he had rasped, that nasty grin leering down at him like a comet on a crash-course to Earth.

He had shoved Richie roughly across the chest, knocking him flat into the grass, looming over him like the terrible, snarling figure of Paul Bunyan. Dirt had caked itself onto Richie's elbows, ass pressed into the overgrown field as a dull ache radiated across his lower back. He looked up through his smudged glasses, seeing Patrick Hockstetter's lanky body heaving as he grinned down at him, all soulless eyes and devil's teeth.

His nipples were hard beneath his yellow shirt— faded Tom Cat graphic leering down at him, tongue rolled out like a carpet. Patrick's

mouth followed suit, licking his lips as he leaned down close to Richie, hot breath fanning over his face.

“You and I aren’t so different you know,” he drawled, flicking the lighter on and off, uncapping and recapping it manically.

*Flick. Off. Flick. Off.*

Richie watched the silver tip erupt into tiny blue-white flames, paralysed in the sight of that looming threat, and the deranged man grinning down at him. He could practically feel the heat of the lighter on his cheek. Patrick’s grip was tight as he clamped a hand over Richie’s shoulder, pressing him crushingly hard into the dirt, rucking up the hem of his shirt.

A terrible scream lodged its way through Richie’s throat, not quite meeting the air as it sunk onto his chest like lead. In that moment, all Richie had been able to think was:

*Oh my God, he’s really gonna do it. He’s really gonna do it and I’m gonna end up with my dead body ditched in the quarry, just another one of the nameless, faceless dead fags of Derry.*

The thought alone, mixed with the feeling of the smouldering heat pressing into his pale skin was enough to rip a scream from his throat.

“That’s right. *Scream*, Tozier,” he laughed, manhandling him as he scorched a path of embers along his right hipbone, “scream for your little *boyfriend* .”

“He’s not my—“ Richie gasped in pain, eyes fluttering shut, “he’s not my boyfriend, you greasy rat-faced *bastard*. Let me go!”

He kicked Patrick, who didn’t even so much as flinch, simply drawing the lighter away for a moment, letting the flame putter out. He leered down at him, wearing a grin that was the picture of self-satisfied.

“We all know you carved his name into the Kissing Bridge, Richie,” he said lowly, condescendingly, ogling him.

Richie felt a twist of hotness clench in his stomach, spreading through his bloodstream like a poison as he suddenly felt very faint and very afraid. His cheeks flushed an angry red, but Richie was nothing more than *ashamed*.

“You know about that?” he asked shakily, hot tears threatening to spill out of his eyes at the blinding white shot of pain that radiated around the burn wound.

“Not until now I didn’t,” he replied nonchalantly, and Richie felt his heart sink further into that oppressive darkness he knew all too well.

Patrick shrugged, “Figured as such, seeing as that’s where all the *fags* go.”

Under any other circumstance, Richie would have rolled his eyes, putting on his best shit-eating grin before saying something like, ‘*and*

*how would you know that, Hockstetter? Got something to tell us?’*

But he felt cotton-mouthed and helpless, and only managed a low whimper as his burn continued to wail, sending a force-field of heat inching its way up his body.

“You know,” Patrick said, breath practically in Richie’s own mouth as he leaned in, “they say guilty men can’t lie.”

He flicked the lighter back on, the flame casting a sickening orange glow to his face, “I we just found out that’s true.”

Patrick’s pants were tighter now, head further away as he seared a path across Richie’s hipbone, branding him with some kind of crude symbol, no doubt. There was some kind of sick sparkle in his eyes, and it was at that moment that Richie realised one of his life’s greatest truths, which was that perhaps the worst monsters of all were human themselves.

Richie had never felt more ashamed.

When Patrick had pulled away, shooting him one last grin before shoving his closed lighter back into his crowded pockets, leaving Richie alone and injured in the grass, he finally got a good look at what had been burned into his skin.

There, in nasty, crude childlike scrawls of red, was an inverted triangle— raw and raised. He had been branded. Marked. Violated.



Richie clutched the sobbing wound and curled up and cried that day. He cried for a long time, until his tears ran out, and then he cried some more. Desperate, heaving sobs that extended the amount of any tears your body could provide, until his throat and eyes felt as raw as the skin on his torso.

He had never been so humiliated.

As Richie came out of the horrid memory— as fresh and tender as it had been that summer day, he found himself trembling violently, a sympathetic surge of heat shooting through his stomach, where the small scar still remained.

Richie curled his arms around himself in that dark sewer water, and then he began to cry.

## 11. Chapter Eleven

*[Back in Chicago, Illinois, Beverly Marsh is frantically packing her luggage. Not frantic in manner, no, her movements are rather slow and languid, weighed down by the stress of it all—but her mind is a racing, hurried vessel. She holds a lighter in one hand, and a cigarette in the other.]*

“Ah, ah, ah,” Ben tsked, striding into the room, “you quit, remember?”

His voice was light, but held a certain kind of firmness to it that was surprisingly persuasive. Ben had a way of making do with simple words- a way of making people *listen*.

Beverly sighed, the exhale filtered with grey-blue smoke, and she felt her shoulder relax slightly. She had stopped smoking, just around the time she returned to Derry, and certainly by the time her and Ben moved in together.

“I know,” she sighed, “old habits die hard, I guess.”

Ben’s eyes followed to his own hand, where a box of Twinkies was being clutched between his fingers. He blushed, as if he’d been caught in the act, “Yeah. I guess so, huh?”

Beverly let out a quiet breath of a laugh, eyes falling fondly upon her boyfriend. He plucked the cigarette from her fingers, bringing it to his mouth and taking a deep inhale.

He coughed, cringing as he shook his head, stubbing it out on the counter beside him, “I could never handle these as a kid.”

“Guess some things never change,” she said, folding her hands in her lap, glancing at the open suitcase at her feet.

“Yeah,” he said, sounding equally as disheartened, but thoughtful as well, “I guess so.”

He sat down next to her, the bed creaking beneath their combined weights, slinging an arm around her shoulder, “Are you sure you want to do this, Bev?”

“Want to?” she asked, trailing off. She had a point, but felt as though it was lost to the winds as her own internal conflict stormed loudly in her mind, in her gut, where her stomach was churning and twisting in tight sailors knots.

*Did she want to?*

“No,” she said slowly, “it’s not a want. It’s a need.”

Love has nothing to do with greed, and neither does justice. It’s a need to be fulfilled and nurtured as it tentatively flowers and blooms. Love is not selfish— it is the upmost selfless act a human can give; to give yourself unconditionally to another human being—to hand them

your life and say, *'Use it as you must, I trust you will be bring it back safely to me.'* To see the person beyond the wildfire and to feel their grief deeper than the flames that sear your own skin.

Beverly knew all too well what it was like to be alone, left with a wound that originated from love. It was a cruel fate.

She refused to let Richie go through this alone, whatever happened.

She turned to Ben, jaw squared and set as her green eyes refused to blink back at him, “We need to do this,” she said, “for him.”

Ben closed his eyes, hand placed over her own, a steady breath escaping from his parted lips. A certain silence fell over them.

Unbeknownst to the other, they were both remembering the same moment, back in that fateful summer of 1989.

*They had just slipped into that dank, desolate sewer for the first time, pulling themselves down the rings of that rusted ladder, Eddie cringing, screwing his eyes shut as he paused halfway down.*

“Oh God, I could totally get sick from this,” he moaned, white-knuckling the rungs like his life depended on it.

There, a good fifteen feet from the cold, concrete ground of It's lair, it quite possibly did.

Richie, despite his shoot-off mouth, seemingly chose to reserve this generally accepted thought to himself. The others didn't dare speak up in fear that Eddie might back out.

"Awe, come on, Eddie, you're alright," he said flippantly, but a concerned tone had seeped through his voice.

Back then, Beverly had attributed it to the fear that he might bail and leave the six of them to face It alone. Now, knowing Richie and his psychology better than ever, especially when it came down to Eddie, she knew it went far deeper than that.

Eddie had shook his head, looking sickly and pale-faced, "No, no. If I touch rusty metal I'll have to get another tetanus shot and those hurt. They hurt so *bad*. Richie..."

Richie, already standing at the bottom of the sewers, had looked up at him behind those Coke-bottle glasses, a gentle but firm look on his face. Richie had never been patient a day in his life, unless it was with Eddie. *Always* with Eddie.

"Come on, Eds," he placated, sighing before adding, "you'll be fine—I promise."

That seemed to get Eddie moving, albeit through brimming tears and tentative steps down. Richie never made promises, so he had to have been serious. Beverly remembered Stan looking at her curiously, the both of them along with Richie on the sewer floor, Ben in tow as

well. Bill had been hovering up above, waiting for Eddie to descend.

Perhaps, looking back, that was the first moment they realised there was more to Richie than they originally perceived.

*Everybody has a secret* , Beverly remembered thinking instinctively—a sentiment seemingly pulled from that outer space, devoid of meaning at the moment, but meaning everything some twenty seven years later.

Eddie had descended one coppery rung after another, eyes squeezed shut, his aspirator a snug weight in his jean pocket. When he finally got within a five foot range, Richie had caught him, pulling him into a bone-crushing hug, popping the inhaler in his mouth as he took a wheezing inhale.

The gasping sound had echoed throughout the hollow sewers, ricocheting off the walls until a steady silence moved in on the room like clouds over the horizon.

“See? I knew you had it in you, Eds!” Richie had exclaimed jovially, no one missing the fact he still had Eddie tucked under his arm, leaning against his chest.

He had hacked a spluttering cough, but didn’t protest to the contact, leaning into it, in fact, if anything.

It was at *that* moment that the Losers realised that perhaps there was more that Eddie feared apart from disease and his own mother, and i

t was that moment that they all decided for themselves that Eddie was starting to face those fears.

Somewhere in that dank, cold sewer, Pennywise grew smaller.

“Don’t call me Eds,” Eddie had mumbled, barely audible to the rest of them, “you know I—“

They were interrupted by the distinct clapping sound of Bill’s sneakers hitting the concrete ground, a determined look on his face.

“Y-You guys r-ruh-ready?”

---

They had trudged along the horrific pathways of Pennywise’s lair for twenty minutes. Stan had just nearly been mauled by the woman in the Modigliani painting, his face etched with nasty red slash marks, tears still drying on his face as the Losers held him.

Bill had separated from the group, coming across a tattered rag-doll version of Georgie, his yellow rain slicker painted with blood where the stump of his arm ended.

They had followed the sound of his shaky voice, standing tentatively back as Bill stepped forward, breath hitching in sobs.

“I wanna go home,” Georgie blubbered, “I miss you, I wanna be with Mom and Dad.”

“I...I want more than anything for you to be home,” Bill had responded, face crumpled in terrible brimming guilt, “Mom, and Dad...I miss you so much,” he murmured, walking towards him.

“I love you, Billy,” Georgie had spoke out into that cold, dark world.

But there was no warmth in that voice. His eyes, glassy and black, held no emotion behind those dams of tears. The sentiment was like an anchor, meant to chain Bill to the floor, where he could live forever in that horrible, sickening guilt until it consumed him, leaving nothing but a throbbing, shattered heart behind.

“I love you too,” Bill all but whispered, chest heaving sporadically, hands shaking as he raised the butt of the gun to Georgie’s forehead, “but you’re not Georgie.”

The sound of the bullet passing through his head was deafening, filling the room like an explosion, his grief derailing like a freight train as it tore a hole through the dirt, where Bill was struggling not to fall in.

And then...



*Silence.*

Awful, suffocating silence.

The Losers had looked at each other then, hearts coming to a dead stop in their chests and wondering:

*What the hell did we just do?*

And that's when the growling started. Georgie's body convulsed like a live-wire, skin pulsing like there was something inside trying to kick its way out.

There were screams, a low, guttural roar, and the wet sloshing sounds of It breaking its way through Georgie's lifeless body, shedding it like a skin as he slunk into existence.

He came to life on wobbly feet, like one of those collapsible wooden dogs. Eddie could be heard screaming in the background, the rest of the Losers contributing to a single order:

*Kill It. Kill It.*

Bill's ragged breath could be heard, a silent scream in his throat as Pennywise's eyes retreated back to their normal state, making an awful crackling sound, body hunched over like a cripple.

Mike mumbled something incoherently, lost in the commotion, eyes wide as he clutched that long, black spear.

Bill grit his teeth, pulling back the gun with a determined click , pressing it unashamedly against the clown's head.

“Hey, it's not loaded!” Mike protested, but they could hardly hear over the sound of Pennywise slumping over, garbled nonsense dripping from his lips.

A kettle-boil of a scream cut through the air as Pennywise seized, bones crackling as he convulsed and snapped his eyes back towards the Losers, looking more deranged than ever.

He pounced on Bill, chomping down on the metal of the gun, and the Losers screamed as he wrestled him to the ground, and endless field of needle-point teeth just inches away from his warm pulse, from his bared neck.

The Losers attacked in jumbled order, Mike slamming against the wall with incredible force, slumping down as he groaned.

Richie had jumped onto his back, patterned shirt billowing in the action as the rest of the gang did their part in abusing Pennywise, holding him down.

Stanley flew much like Mike had moments before, followed by a yelling Richie, and then Beverly, who hurried the others away as Bill

lay pinned against the ground, Pennywise hovering over him like a lion.

His gloved hands gripped Bill's chin, clamping down on his throat as he struggled and gasped.

"No, don't," Beverly demanded hoarsely, "let him go."

"No," Pennywise shook his head manically, "I'll take him...I'll take *all* of you. And I'll *f-f-feast* on your flesh as I *feed* on your *fear*."

A few feet away, Richie sat, panting.

Unbeknownst to the rest of the Losers at the time, Richie had been internally making a decision that would end up saving them all.

Pennywise held up a shaking finger, golden eyes unblinking as his mouth remained painted into that horrible gaping cavern.

"Or...you'll just leave us be," he clutched Bill's face roughly, clamping a gloved hand over his mouth, "I'll take him... *only* him. And then I will have my *long* rest, and you...will all *live*...to *grow* and *thrive*, and lead *happy* lives...until old age takes you back to the *weeds*."

On the ground, a kind of grim determination came over Richie's eyes.

Through wheezing breaths, Bill managed a tearful, “Leave...I’m the one who dragged you all into this. I’m s-suh-suh—so sorry.”

*“S-Suh-Sorry,”* Pennywise laughed drily, hand squeezing even more tightly around his throat.

“Go!” Bill yelled hoarsely.

The Losers looked at each other, paralysed.

“Guys...I mean, we can’t!” Beverly protested.

She had loved him well enough back then.

They all had.

“I’m s-s-sorry,” Bill whispered, a tone of resignation in his voice as he stopped struggling.

Three feet away, Richie struggled to his feet.

“I told you Bill. I fucking told you. I don’t wanna die...it’s your fault.”

Pennywise grimaced a disgusting grin, holding Bill closer, predatorily.

In It's grasp, Bill teared up, gazing sorrowfully at Richie. There wasn't a semblance of anger in those eyes, just understand. Just guilt.

It was that guilt that edged Richie forward.

He started to pace, numbering instances on his fingers, "You punched me in the face, you made me walk through shitty water, you brought me to a fuckin' crackhead house..."

Pennywise leered in morbid pride, holding Bill tighter.

"And now..." Richie grabbed the baseball bat.

He looked at Pennywise's stupid face.

"I'm gonna have to kill this fuckin' clown."

Pennywise dropped Bill like a dead weight.

"Welcome to the Losers club, asshole!" he yelled as Pennywise clambered towards him.

It pounced...and Richie's bat cut through the air, smacking him square in the jaw as he stumbled back with a gasp.

One by one, the Losers faced the physical manifestations of their fears, until Pennywise was reduced to a blubbing, gasping figure slinking back into the well in defeat.

*They owed it all to Richie that day*, Beverly and Ben couldn't help but think.

They *owed* him.

Shakily, Beverly looked into Ben's eyes, "We have to do this."

Nodding, they rose from the bed and started to pack.

## 12. Chapter Twelve

*[It was nighttime now— not that Eddie could tell, at least not from his location. In that cold, dark sewer, day was just as dismal as night. But there exists a kind of urgency in the night. The sense that a change is encroaching upon you, impeding, shifting.*

*In the nighttime, the monsters in the dark seem a bit more plausible, the air like acid, the walls resembling faces in such startling paralysis that you can't reason it away. Nighttime invites trouble, and it invites it with flourishing words printed on card-stock paper, willingly, temptingly, so alluringly, it can't be resisted or changed. The invitation to trouble is sent on its way with a red wax seal, and the sweet kiss of death*

*The dark has a way of seducing danger, taking it to its bed and ravishing it until you called it home. Until you called it love.*

*Eddie isn't comfortable in this endless spans of night, and that is a good omen indeed. One cannot be afraid of the dark without first being able to remember light.*

*In that rotted, drenched sewer, Eddie trudged along, mere miles away from salvation, well within the home-stretch.*

*But he had never felt so uneasy.]*

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One thing that Eddie noticed about the sewers was that they were alarmingly consistent.

If you disregard the serpentine pathways of it all, they were nothing if not predictable, palpable, and manically repetitive.

The slow drip of run-off sewage continued to echo, falling unceremoniously into the dark waters. His ears had started ringing—a compensation for the utter silence, or perhaps a manifestation of his own exhaustion.

A furious burn radiated through his legs, singing his muscles and locking his knees as he stumbled forward, each clambering step paining him.

His jaw was tight and aching from gritting it so hard. His ears swum, mingled with his vision. Eddie could *hear* the darkness as it called to him, pulling him down like a sailor to a siren, its sweet voice fanning over his ear. His temples throbbed with fatigue, mouth dry and caked over with some kind of white, dehydrated film. His hands were freezing, numb and glove-like as they sunk towards the ground like corpses returning home.

His nose was bleeding— raw from the chill. He half-halfheartedly swiped a stray trickle of blood away, and disregarded the way it continued to flow as he wiped his hand on his shirt.

Eddie had simultaneous never felt more and less like himself.

The paranoia was bad too— spending twenty-four hours in a desolate, haunted sewer wasn't too good on the nerves, and that was



only the time he'd be *conscious*. Eddie shivered at the thought he'd been down here just a week short of a month. He should have been rotting and well on his way to decomposing by now. But instead, he was here, straggling through the sewers like a zombie, hunger gnawing at his stomach like a wolf.

*He must not have been starving the entire time he's been down here , he thought distantly. He would have been skeletal and too weak to stand if he had been.*

He reasoned that, by some twisted logic only in effect in the core of Derry, he managed to stay suspended in a kind of trance-like state for the better half of a month, escaping relatively unscathed.

*Unscathed*— at the thought, the wound on his stomach ached pointedly, spitting up some kind of disgusting conglomeration of pus and blood. Thankfully, it seemed to be relatively untouched by the waters he was wading in, and Eddie found himself hoping that it wouldn't get infected until he got out of this hellhole.

Hellhole...the metallic sounds of pipes groaning and protesting under the weight of the sewage made an eerie soundtrack that did nothing to placate Eddie's live-wire nerves.

The temperature seemed to drop to sub-zero, his bottom lip cracking and trembling, no doubt going blue as he dragged himself further and further along.

His body shivered weakly— a measly attempt at retaining some semblance of heat.

And just when Eddie was about to keel over and give into the urging, violent need for sleep, he heard something that made his blood freeze to ice inside his veins.

A slow, straggling drag of a clubbed foot, scratching languidly along the concrete floor.

Had anything natural been making it, the sound should have been swallowed up by the water.

It wasn't.

Eddie's eyes widened, creaking behind his drooping eyelids, now alert as he felt a whisper of a chill run down his spine.

Then came the splashing.

A clumsy, staggered kick ripped through the water like a current, like a knife. It sounded like when someone tried to run through the ocean at a beach, and it was getting closer. Yanking himself out of that slow-drip paralysis of fear that bled through his veins, he spun around on his heel, met with the decrepit, sore-covered face of the leper.

It wasn't just any leper— it was the one that first chased him on Neibolt street all those years ago, that fateful summer day.

His face was gashed and torn, big, gaping wounds gawking at Eddie like eyeballs, thin mucousy webs of tendons spilling out like angel hair pasta over his moth-eaten skin. A few strands of dead hair clung stubbornly to his forehead, where bugs crawled and twitched, burrowing further into that barren forest of fuzz. He gaped at Eddie, mouth rotted and black, a thick trail of spit the same colour plopping wetly into the water, coating his chin, where it sizzled and burned like acid. His mouth was full of open sores, red and painful looking — brimming with infection. Blood seeped onto his tongue, squirting through the gaps between his few remaining teeth.

He grinned, and straggled towards Eddie.

His body was covered with lesions— raised and blackening, weeping some kind of filmy fluid. His skin was nearly eaten away, and frog-like in texture.

Eddie wanted to scream.

Instead, he stayed silent, feeling his head go faint as he stumbled backwards, almost calm in the overwhelming surge of fear.

“Eddie,” the leper rasped, exposing thin vocal chords in the hollow of his neck. He outstretched a thin, bony hand, eaten away with age and decay. In his palm rested an array of pills— red and white, “time to take—

—*your pills* ,” his mother said, dropping a capful of shiny capsules in

front of him, grinning like it was a full-course meal.

Really, it had enough variety that it might be considered as such; vitamin E, C, D, and B-12 for good measure. Huddled into a little pocket by themselves like giggling school girls sat iron, calcium, and magnesium— blindingly white, like snow coating the roof of a house, or Eddie's own mouth. Some good old fashioned Myadec mingled with a One-A-Day tablet— the chalky, adult kind, of course, his mother would never give him the gummy, sugary variety-

*'They'll give you diabetes, Eddie!'*

And all by its lonesome, so as to not chatter to the other pills, sat an orange and white horse-pill of a medication that twenty seven years later, Eddie would identify as a particularly potent form of ADHD medication. Eddie sat at the kitchen table, casted arm aching something fierce. It was like someone shoved woof splinters through his bones, which is exactly what happened.

Eddie was bored, miserable and furiously itchy. Nobody told him that having a cast would be so *itchy*— if they had, he might have asked the doctors to leave his arm hanging limply by his side instead.

He swallowed a few painkillers willingly, closing his eyes as he felt the medicine slow through his veins— a temporary respite.

But he just stared blankly at the cornucopia of pills before him that his mother was trying to coerce into his mouth.

“Well?” she asked, standing in front of him— pink, plump and quickly growing annoyed, “Aren’t you going to take them?”

Eddie looked past her floral rucksack of a dress, garishly bright peonies staring back at him as he sighed, utterly and completely bored. The sun was filtering through the window, casting specks of dust into orbit through the air that, if Mrs. Kaspbrak would have seen, would have a fit immediately.

*‘You’re allergic to dust, Eddie! You mustn’t expose yourself to any dust, dander, or dirt. And stay off that grass, you know how your allergies get!’*

Eddie was just silently grateful that she seemed to have forgotten to give him his allergy medication. If he had to eat another pill, he felt as though he would puke.

While scientists seem to have settled on the conclusion that the four necessary elements for life are carbon, oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen, the four elements to sustain any healthy prepubescent boy’s spirit was, in fact, everything Sonia Kaspbrak hated;

*Dirt, dander, dust, and grass.*

Sure, he was a paranoid hypochondriac— it was written into his genes. But deep down inside, a hunger grew and pained him, the desire to get filthy and muddy and be a *kid*.

Sunlight filtered through the window and around Mrs. Kaspbrak’s frame. Had it been anyone else, it would have almost looked angelic,

but all Eddie could think of in that moment was how that shell of a mother was the only thing encroaching on his reach to the outside world.

Eddie stood up, the chair screeching against the floor, and before his mother could chide him, Eddie was running his mouth.

“My sickness? What sickness, Ma?” he took a nearby bottle of pills, mouth twitching as he brought it into her eyesight.

“You know what these are? They’re gazebo!” he yelled, smashing it on the ground, pills skittering like roaches behind the couch, “They’re *bullshit!*”

Sonia watched the medication settle in various corners of the room before training her gaze back on him, “They *help* you, Eddie,” she said, voice low and alarmingly steady, “I had to protect you.”

He felt her placating, subtlycondescending tone wash over him like a wave, pulling him deeper and deeper into submission.

He knew that in a moment, she would envelope him in a bone-crushing hug and the last remaining dredges of his own indignation would putter out like a wheezing car engine.

Eddie pushed forward.

“Protect me? By lying to me, by keeping me locked inside this hellhole?!”

He took a gasp, eyes wide, “I’m sorry, but the only people that were actually trying to protect me were my friends.” He looked up at her pinkening face, jaw set, eyes heartless, “And you made me turn my back on them when I really needed them. So I’m going.”

He rushed past the door, her turning after him, yelling out a frantic, “Eddie, Eddie! You get back here!”

As he leapt off the porch, arm stinging as it jostled roughly, he had never felt more alive and yet, so *scared*.

Eddie’s jaw squared at the memory, filled with a steely sense of determination much stronger than the overbearing clutch of sleep and of complacency.

He would *not* die in this hellhole again.

With a battle cry, he socked the leper in the face with the arm that had been broken all those years ago, and felt a sharp twinge as the old injury resurfaced.

He ignored it, “They’re gazebos, you asshole!” he yelled before shoving the leper into the shitty water, drowning it as it gargled and spat weakly, a stream of liquid pulsing up from his throat and spraying Eddie in the face.

He held it down tighter, gritting his teeth harshly as the leper convulsed, slowing before finally stopping altogether.

Silence.

And then the rubbery sound of a balloon bopping past.

*'NINE OUT OF TEN DOCTORS AGREE THAT ASTHMA MEDICATION GIVES YOU CANCER,'* the red balloon read in bloated white text.

“Oh, fuck *off*,” he said, thwacking it away, before continuing his trek out and away from that cold, dismal sewer.

He saw the light.

He walked towards it.



## 13. Chapter Thirteen

When Richie finally pulled himself up from the ground, it was nighttime. Not that Richie knew that, of course. But it was nighttime nonetheless.

He must have nodded off— head heavy with exhaustion and tears, and he felt a twinge of guilt as he realised that hours had passed without him looking for Eddie.

The next thing he felt was Patrick Hockstetter's hand, or rather, the lack of it. The gentle current had moved his wrist away from Richie, along with his body, but there it sat, sure as day, lying motionless in the waters.

A grin was still plastered over his face, whites of his eyes open and rolled towards Richie as he straggled up, looking at the bloated figure in distaste.

"Oh, fuck *off*," he muttered, pressing the soaked bottom of his shoe harshly into his face, his head rolling back complacently, half-submerged in the water now.

And then, shivering, he continued to walk down the dark tunnels.

He recogniaed this particular branch of the sewer, in spite of the seamless darkness that surrounded him. He could identify it with his eyes closed— and right now, in the all-encompassing black, he felt as though he had a pretty good idea of what that would be like. It

turned his blood electric, his skin into one painful goose-bump. His breath hitched, and he ached in remembrance. The last time he traversed this path, he didn't so much as walk as he was dragged.

Dragged— *dragged* away from...

"*Eddie*," Richie breathed, seeing the opening to that giant, cobweb-plastered room.

The place where they had left Eddie to die.

Everything had led up to this moment— all those twenty seven years and the countless more he shares with him, spending God-knows-how-long completely, utterly, shamefully in love with him.

It all lead up to this.

Every tear, every scream, every quiet whisper in the night as he clutched Eddie's shirt to his chest. Every joke, every minute, every single moment of Richie Tozier's life was about to come together in one giant bang, reconciling every inch of his shame and grief over the last nearly three decades into something that made sense.

The only thing that *ever* made sense.

Heart roaring in his chest, blood pooling in his ears, Richie took a deep breath, and pushed through the door.

“Eds!” he called, feeling a wave of euphoria crash over him.

This was finally happening.

He was finally going to get to see him again, hold him again. He was finally going to be able to say everything he never got to say; Eddie, Eddie, oh my God, *Eddie* —

“Eddie?” Richie said quietly, coming to stand in the middle of the room, where large chunks of broken rubble emerged from the ground like the separating petals of a flower.

There, in the quiet corner where they had left Eddie to die, sat nothing but a small pool of blood, and a small scrap of fabric torn from a t-shirt.

*Eddie’s t-shirt.*

Richie bore the tragic face of a man who was starting to realise the cold, callous truth of things and just wasn’t ready to face it.

Wasn’t ready to stare into that cold, empty world. Wasn’t ready to step back into that house by himself again— retreating back for good like a heartbreakingly final tide at dusk. Wasn’t ready to face a world without Eddie in it— a sunless world where not everyone gets happy endings and it’s not such a crime.

So he continued to play along.

“Come on, Eds. Stop hiding, you bastard,” he laughed, the sound strangled and pained, but a smile rested on his face. “you were always so good at that...”

He knelt down on the ground, shoulders hunched as he smiled down at his lap, gently feeling the strip of fabric between his fingers.

“I used to say it was because you were so *small*,” he chuckled to himself, blinking up at the ceiling, “yeah, you hated that, didn’t you, Eds?”

He remembered one particularly significant game of hide and seek amongst the Losers, that very summer where everything changed.

When It was known— no longer a figment of the imagination, but still but a shadow in the dark. A cold, clawed hand pushing daisies up from the wet earth, a glare in your eyes when you turn away from the sun. In that safe, comfortable pocket of time— so fleeting, and yet seeming to last forever. The gentle moments before the turning point in their lives, where the last dredges of their childhood bleed slowly down the pages like water from the quarry, moving languidly down their skin, the sun a warm and hopeful omen above them.

*It was a stiflingly hot day— far too hot to be outside, and that’s how the Losers found themselves tucked into various nooks of Mrs. Kaspbrak’s house as cicadas burred lowly outside.*

Eddie's mom, of course, as you might have guessed, wasn't home when this large-scale game of hide and seek commenced, and they made damn sure she wasn't home before it ended. She would have a fit if she knew Eddie had snuck what she so affectionately described as the 'riff-raff' into her home while she visited Eddie's aunts just a few towns over for the day.

So, the Losers lay low that day, keeping a careful ear trained for the tell-tale sound of a car coming up the driveway or a particularly large woman hobbling up the steps.

But there had been perhaps no one as quiet as Eddie that day as he slipped into his mother's closet, the distant sound of counting drowned out by his own relentless thoughts as he peered around the claustrophobic room. Richie had joined him all but two minutes later, standing expectantly in the crook of the door, which had been left half-heartedly agape like a person's mouth in the middle of a sentence.

There was so much to be said about that dim silence. But silence, as silence usually does, continued to hold its secrets. Luckily, Richie wouldn't have known silence if silence knocked on his door and slapped him in the face. So Richie had done what he always did best —

He started to run his mouth.

"Either you're not trying, or you're always this bad at following instructions."

Eddie had jumped, as if startled by Richie's presence. Fair enough—most people were. The door creaked loudly on its hinged as Richie twitchingly pushed it aside, stepping further into the room. He wore a self-satisfied grin on his face as he delved into the bubbling, murky depths of another one of the Voices he would try—and fail, to perfect over the years.

*“Eddie is a pleasant and conscientious student— not to mention cute, cute, cute! But he fails to understand even the most basic of instructions!”* Richie had crowed, smiling ear to ear, jostling Eddie gently with his arm, being mindful of his cast.

Eddie had just frowned to himself, eyes trained on something in his hand, sitting himself down on the floor. No eye roll, no fiery bite back, just a small and disheartened, “Beep beep, Richie.”

Richie remembered frowning that day, feeling his heart ache distantly. He also remembered the words that had come out of his mouth next.

“Room for me down there, Eddie Spaghetti?”

He had coaxed a small laugh out of Eddie at that, the boy scooting over pointedly, leaving a small space in the tiny room for Richie to slide beside him. Richie had to hunch over in that awkward, gangly way that came with the growing pains of budding adolescence, an impressive growth spurt setting up camp in the Tozier body that summer like a wandering gypsy.

Eddie had snorted, looking at him almost fondly as he crumpled up beside him, glasses askew, “Not if you keep growing there won’t be.”

“Not all of us can be small and cute like you, Eds,” Richie had responded in a sort of, *‘what are you gonna do about it’* tone, laughing when Eddie’s face scrunched up.

“Don’t make me punch you in my mother’s closet, Richie,” he said snippily, words chopped and rushed like always, before adding softly, “and don’t call me Eds.”

Richie remembered feeling his heart warm at that— the subtle way Eddie’s mouth twitched, as if he was trying to hold back a smile. He remembered feeling very warm in a way he could no longer blame on the suffocating summer heat outside.

And then he remembered where they were.

“Say, Eds, why are we in Mrs. Kaspbrak’s closet?” he inquired, looking around, “I already have a pair of her underwear, but thanks for the thought.”

Eddie had gasped at that, clocking Richie in the shoulder with his good arm, wincing as it shot an arrow of pain through his still-healing one.

“That is so fucking disgusting, Richie, why—“

“Eds,” he had interrupted, looking at him seriously.

He’d never forget the way Eddie had remained tense for a moment, before deflating like a balloon as his back hit the wall of the closet. He fiddled with that thing in his hand again, and then subtly let it into Richie’s view, flat in his palm. It was a compass— etched with peeling brown leather and strung onto a rusty bronze chain. The needles still spun loyally, and Richie found himself marvelling at how something so ancient could still work.

He was about to express some semblance of that thought when Eddie’s shy voice had filled the silence.

“I was trying to find this,” he said quietly, fingers running over it in almost childlike wonder. He screwed his eyes shut, as if holding back tears before whispering, “it was my dad’s.”

Richie remembered that moment being dizzying— his dynamic with Eddie halting on its axis as every joke on the tip of his tongue melted, leaving only honey in his words and stars in his eyes.

“Eds, I—“

“My mom took it away,” he added, even more quietly.

“That *bitch* ,” Richie snarled, and for once, Eddie hadn’t protested to



the blatant slander of his own mother.

That had only concerned Richie more, but he hadn't had a chance to act on it before Eddie had been speaking into the silence again, his voice still soft, and yet filled with some kind of quiet rebellion.

"I want to keep it," he said, avoiding Richie's eyes that implored him determinedly, "but there's no way I could. My mom..."

"I could keep it for you," Richie had blurted out with the sheer impulse of a man blind with love, hastily followed by the kind of shame belonging to the same identity, "if...if you want, of course.

Eddie turned towards him, staring at his heated face as if trying to gauge if he was being serious or, well... *Richie*.

Whatever he was searching for, he must have found, Richie thought to himself, because then his face had softened as he nodded his head, voice hardly above a whisper as he said, "Okay."

He pressed a hand over Richie's curls, guiding him to bow his head as he carefully slipped the chain over his head. Under any other circumstance, Richie would have made a joke about him needing to update his tetanus shot, but he remained quiet as Eddie's fingers brushed softly against the side of his neck.

His hand had instinctually flew up to touch the compass, closing over Eddie's as they locked eyes for one pulse-stuttering, thick moment.

That was when the other Losers had come calling for Richie, heading in the direction of Mrs. Kaspbrak's room.

Richie had pulled a smiling Eddie to his feet, reconvening with the disgruntled gang in the hall.

"What the hell, Richie?" Stan frowned, "You're terrible at finding people!"

Richie had just slung an arm around Eddie, ruffling the soft curls that had just begun to grow out and said, "Well I managed to find this here boy, right Eddie Spaghetti?"

Eddie had just rolled his eyes, punching him softly in the arm before wriggling out of his grip.

And as he spotted that small smile beginning to come over Eddie's face, Richie knew he was going to be okay.

Eddie grinned back at the group, shooting Richie a brief exasperated smile, "This time, I'm the seeker!"

*Richie had brought his hand up to the compass and—*

He let his fingers close over the small pendant, fingers brushing over the cool glass. His knees had started to ache against the cold concrete

floor, but he stayed there, head bowed.

“I still have it, Eds,” he whispered into the empty room, “after all these years. I promised you I’d keep it safe....”

The silence greeted him like an overbearing relative, coercing him into its cold, dead arms.

*I promised I’d keep you safe too.*

Richie looked over at the small stain of red that bled into the grey ground, long since dried and crackling across the concrete.

A few feet away sat Richie’s jacket he had used in a desperate attempt to stop the bleeding, sprawled lazily across the floor like a drunk. Blood was still seeped into the fabric— a rough and heavy weight on it.

Richie brought it closer to him, holding it to his chest like a child might do with a teddy bear, burying his nose in the soft fabric.

He let his eyes shut and started to remember how—

*Eddie had crawled up Richie’s body, hovering over Richie’s face, whites of his eyes showing as he slipped out of the trance of the Deadlights.*

Richie's eyes had widened, breath stuttering in his throat as he realized how fucking close Eddie was— just mere inches from his face.

“I really killed him, buddy! Hey, Richie, listen. I think I got him, man!”

Eddie looked behind him briefly, and as he turned back towards Richie, his smile was like a halo of warmth beaming down on Richie's face— God, that fucking *smile*.

*I love you* , Richie had thought in that moment, and the words were just ghosting over his lips when Eddie continued.

“I did it! I think I got him for real!”

Just as Richie was about to place his hand on Eddie's cheek, fingers grazing the soft skin under his eye as he prepared himself to speak the words he'd been waiting to say for almost thirty years, a fountain of blood splattered over his face.

Eddie's gullet had been skewered by one of Pennywise's appendages, impaling his soft skin through his cotton shirt.

For one horrible, unforgettable moment that would forever haunt Richie, Eddie's grin remained plastered on his face, oblivious to his fatal wound and the sound of Richie's heart breaking in two. And then, like a storm cloud over the horizon, a horrible flicker of

realisation hazed over his eyes.

Richie distantly heard someone screaming, and it wasn't until hours later that he realized it had been him— the sound ripping its way out of his body from that dark place deep down inside of him; one final roar of indignation for what had never gotten to see the light.

“*Richie,*” Eddie had whimpered— voice child-like and shaky.

He had looked at Richie, desperate to see how he could get them out of this one. Richie had an odd way of fixing things, but after seeing that claw pierce Eddie's chest, everything seemed to be broken.

“ *Richie,*” Eddie repeated, black blood spilling thickly out of his mouth like it had that day at Neibolt.

*It knew all along* , Richie remembered thinking in that moment, *It knew and so did I.*

Richie had stared down the face of his worst nightmare, unaware it would set off an echo through the universe and bring him right back here twenty seven years later, sobbing on his knees as his luck finally ran out. Richie remembered clutching Eddie to his chest as he died, his wounds weeping blood that soaked through Richie's own shirt, caking against his skin. He remembered seeing the light in Eddie's eyes dim as they fluttered one last time before stopping in their sockets, still wide with fear.

He remembered feeling the blood roaring in his ears, feeling faint and detached as he held Eddie's limp body in a death-grip against his own, nose buried in the fine hairs at the nape of his neck.

"No, don't leave, Eds. *Don't leave...*" he had sobbed frantically, breath hitching in small, choked-off hiccups as he felt Beverly pull him away.

*Honey, honey. He's dead.*

Richie was shaking violently on the cold, concrete floor, his jaw quivering as he seized and trembled, suffocating waves of nausea crashing over him until he was gasping for breath, clutching at his throat, clutching at his chest.

"You fucking *bitch*," he found himself screaming, the sound ripped out of him, voice raw as the testimony ricocheted off the cold, bare walls.

*Why did you do that?* Richie's subconscious asked— a whisper in the storm as he lay crumpled on the ground.

*I don't know* , he responded, lower lip quivering as he brought his arms closer against his chest, face buried in that jacket like a safety blanket.

But he knew well enough.

Shakily rising to his feet, Richie left that cruel, unforgiving room. And then he ran— faster than Silver against the whipping winds, faster than the Devil himself and all of Richie's own demons; faster than his own heart and the crushing weight of grief. Richie fled from that cold, invisible Eddie and into the dark, winding paths of the sewers, tears freezing against his face as they stained his grimy skin. Richie ran, and he didn't stop until he was coming out the other end of that hopeless canal and down the beaten road to his childhood home, staring at him sympathetically, like an old friend.

Branches whipped against his face as he cut through the Barrens, slashing red, angry lines across his wet cheeks, but Richie didn't notice the sting as the familiar road came into view. He leaned all his weight onto the front door, legs weak and wobbly as he trailed up the stairs, collapsing like a dead weight onto the bed, where he crumpled up and cried— cold, miserable, and helpless in the jaws of ruthless, consuming grief.

As Richie fell into a dreamless sleep, he found himself thinking, *Beverly was wrong.*

Eddie was gone, and he wasn't coming back.

## 14. Chapter Fourteen

### Notes for the Chapter:

Quote at the end of chapter is from ‘Don’t It Make You Want To Go Home?’ by Bobby Bare ♡

*[It was 6 pm, and Beverly Marsh’s Chicago-to-Derry plane had just begun to descend from the thick, airless mass of clouds in the sky. Beside her sat Ben Hanscom, who was worrying at a mint with a pensive look on his face. She grabbed his hand, squeezing gently. Just a few hundred feet below them rest the sleepy town of Derry.]*

*They were going home.]*

Beverly’s hand trembled slightly over Ben’s, her scarlet red bottom lip slipping into her mouth as she worried at it, face pale under the dim lights of the plane’s hall.

“You okay?” Ben whispered, leaning over the small armrest that separated them.

Beverly looked over at him, green eyes glimmering with something like fear— twitching and uneasy.

“I’m alright,” she said slowly, exhaling a small breath as her eyes fluttered close, head sinking into the back of the seat, “just wondering if the others are on their way.”



“You know they are, Bev,” Ben said softly.

“But what if they decide not to come?” she responded, voice tense, like a rubber band one tug away from snapping under that horrible prodding tension.

Ben just looked at her, looking more determined than she’d ever recalled him looking in the twenty seven years she’d known him.

“They will,” he said.

And as the metal vessel cut through the white sky like a searing knife, tumbling and free-falling into the jaws of every childhood fear reincarnated, straight into the ugly, dangerous maw of Derry—Beverly closed her eyes and hoped for the third time that day that Ben was right.

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*[Somewhere along that great, rolling battlefield that made up the sky, Bill Denbrough was having his last drink of the flight, his flight set to land in an hour's time. He had been on the plane for five of them already, hands trembling as he brought the cheap whisky to his mouth. His laptop sat abandoned on the tray table in front of him— his struggling manuscript practically begging him to bring his fingers to the keys and write something, anything. But he found himself unable to tear his eyes away from the window, watching as the world idled for a brief moment.*

*Things wouldn't be so stagnant on the ground.]*

A muffled announcement came over the speakers, a distant flicker of light in the corner of Bill's peripheral, mingling boredly with the droning sounds of passengers commenting tiredly and a curt beeping sound. The air was thin and stale, a bead of sweat traversing slowly down his arm, stopping anti-climatically, where it settled on the skin of his flank. Despite the balmy climate of the metal box and Bill's smart jacketlinging aptly to his body, he felt a full-body shiver freeze through him, pooling coolly at his feet.

He thought about his childhood home back in Derry, where a cozy Hallmark-like family had taken up residence, the youngest child—wide-eyed and touched by It's glacial, unforgiving graze, holes burnt into his eyes from that oppressive, inescapable fire that brewed and sizzled behind those dead pupils.

He had died in that fun-house, the night of the Canal Day Festival, only a thin pane of mirrored glass and a God-less world standing between him, the kid, and salvation.

Pennywise had torn him apart in front of his eyes, the thick, youthful blood splattering across the glass like paintballs— a whole life over, just as quick as that.

He examined a newspaper tucked inside of the front pocket of his seat.

'*THE DERRY TIMES*' it read, in old, Shakespearean scrawl. Below the sprawling title lay a small box dedicated to announcements. Beside

an ad for a babysitter, with horrifically sick irony, sat a 'missing' poster, the young girl's cheerful face etched in black ink. She had a handprint splotch of grey across her one cheek— a birthmark, and an impressive one at that. The kind you would have gotten bullied for back at Derry Elementary all those years ago. The kind you would have gotten bullied for even *now*.

Bill felt a twinge in his chest, felt the air flee his lungs in one curt, indignant motion.

*She's probably dead too*, he thought glumly.

He thought about that family; how it was probably becoming a skeleton of its true form by now— a dead carcass of what once *was*. Were they still clinging to the hope that that boy could still be alive like Bill had, or had they accepted the callous, unforgiving truth like his father had? Bill couldn't decide which reaction was braver. Bill couldn't decide which reaction would tear you up the least inside.

Hands trembling, he brought the glass to his mouth again, finishing his whiskey in one shuddering gulp.

He remembered the way the heat had seemed to fled the Denbrough residence the day Georgie died. The way the house seemed to drop thirty degrees when they found his torn-off rain-slicker-clad arm poised by the sewers. How his mother's piano playing grew more and more dismal, the keys falling languidly out of tune as his mother played like a woman trying to flee from her demons in every rush of her fingers over the slick, ivory keys.

The strings grew weary and the top collected dust, until the music

stopped entirely.

The sound was soon replaced by the near-constant resonance of his mother's blubbing, gasping sobs filtering up the stairs and through the grates of the vent in his bedroom.

He remembered banging his fists against the wall until his knuckles were cracked and bleeding before throwing his hands over his ears as he slid down that bruised wall and onto the floor, where he collapsed into hitching sobs.

*Stop crying!* he wanted to scream, *the rest of us are keeping it all inside — it's not fair, it's not fair!*

But deep down inside, he knew his father was doing just as a paltry job at coping. Sometimes Bill heard loud bangs come from the garage late at night, like someone had taken a sledgehammer to the house.

He'd wake up and walk the splintered trails left behind.

And if there was a gravitational force that bound the Denbrough family together, it was broken the day Georgie died, sending all of them careening into that unfamiliar territory, lost to the ever-relentless push and pull of time. Bill was floating in that empty space — that cold, cruel universe, piercing screams cutting through the air like a knife, severing the strings that once bound them together.

*You feel the same way,* Bill had thought every day, *so why are you*

*crying so far apart?*

Yes, he'd clutched his hands over his ears, blood spilling over his cheeks and tainting his tears as he cried and cried and cried.

"*Bill*," he remembered Beverly asking the next day, "*are you—*

*—alright?*" a voice beside him said, and he dropped the empty shot glass onto the ground, shattering it.

The twinkly sounds of it crackling over the ground came to a dead stop near his foot, which hovered over the pieces, stunned.

"I'm sorry, what?" Bill said, turning his head to look at the flight attendant standing in the aisle next to him, who was beginning to look concerned.

"I said, are you alright, sir?" she repeated, looking curiously at him.

He shivered, letting out a breathless wheeze of a laugh. It was mirthless, and weighed heavily on the air.

"I'm fine," he said, subtly shifting the shards of glass away from him, adjusting his shirt collar self-consciously.

“Very good, sir,” she said, eyes darting down the aisles. She was like a nervous bird, Bill thought, and then with a tug on his heart:

*Stan.*

“You must put your seatbelt on,” she said apologetically, glancing pointedly at the flashing sign to his right, “I’m afraid we’ve been experiencing some turbulence. More than originally expected.”

“Yeah,” Bill said, buckling up his seatbelt, and then, more to himself than to her, said, “that’s always how it goes, isn’t it?”

Glancing at him briefly once again, she furrowed her brows, creasing a small line in her forehead. She was young, and the years had done little to age her, *decay* her.

“Sir, are you certain you’re alright?”

Bill just looked at her so distantly he was almost looking past her, eyes fogged over with a kind of gaze that made the flight attendant shiver next to him, as if she’d been dumped into a bucket of ice water.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked, a small smile on his face, “I’m going home.”

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*[Nestled in the worn, upholstered chairs of Derry's airport sat Mike Hanlon, a pensive look on his face, and a gold watch on his wrist. He watched the time tick by; slowly, languidly, and wondered briefly if the others were doing the same]*

Mike perhaps was the most comfortable of them all to be back in Derry, having lived there for twenty seven years of his life.

In fact, Derry felt more like a home to him than Florida did, which was a scary thought. Unbeknownst to Mike Hanlon, the sentiment was universal amongst the Losers, who felt less like they were walking towards their doom and more like they were walking straight through the front door of their own childhood homes. The funny thing about sour familiarity is that it is still familiarity nonetheless. Deep down inside, whether you like it or not, something has planted roots deep inside of you, and just like a riptide, it can drag you back down to the weeds whenever it pleases. It wouldn't even be hard.

That hot summer day of 1989 when they had brought that jagged piece of glass to their palms and made an oath bound them all together with Derry, inextricably. There was nothing they could do to change that.

Offhandedly, Mike wondered if, if given the chance:

*Would they have?*

*Could they have?*

The thing about wielding a sledgehammer is that, when you do, everything starts to look like a nail. And that's what the spirit of Derry did; exploited your weaknesses, ripping open those jagged, throbbing wounds, and ramming into them until you cried mercy, *mercy*.

And then Derry would smile, and carry on destroying.

That's just what Derry did— Mike knew well enough. The evil didn't flee Derry every twenty seven years, just grew less localized. And maybe that was worse; when you couldn't place the wound. Where you could place the beating, pulsing heart of it all. Where you didn't know what to fear.

Checking his watch once again, Mike Hanlon slumped deeper into his seat, and waited for the others to arrive.

---

The Losers met in a perfect juxtaposition of how it happened all those years ago the summer of 1989.

There was no Ben Hanscom sliding clumsily down the jagged rocks of the quarry, stomach yanked up to his tits with Henry Bowers' initials bleeding fiercely from his belly.



There was no Bowers gang after them— there was no Bowers gang at all.

But perhaps the loss they felt the deepest was the absence of Eddie sucking on his inhaler. It was this memory that pushed them further into that bed of silence, nobody daring to speak a word in fear of disturbing something fragile. In fear of meddling with factors they didn't understand. They just stood awkwardly, smack dab in the middle of that blindingly white airport, people skittering like roaches around them, paying no mind to the oddly powerful circle that had just reconnected.

They were back home.

Home— it's funny how a place like Derry could still be home, in spite of everything that had happened. That that cold, piercing grip could still be so visceral. That deep down beneath Derry's skeletal frame, a heart beat surely, steadily, and there, deep in that junction, their hearts beat there too.

In a breath of silent agreement, they stepped into the cool, dark night. The sun had started to set in great haste, the last dredges of light squeezing out of the sky as the paling face of autumn reared its head.

Things were changing.

As they stepped into the taxi cab parked outside, they found themselves looking out the window, far into the horizon. If you had followed their path of eyesight at that moment, it would have lead

you directly to the canal, where five minutes later, a very weary Eddie Kaspbrak would emerge.

As the engine sputtered to life, the car took off, roaring down the beaten paths of Derry for the very last time.

*'All God's children get weary when they roam*

*Don't it make you wanna go home?*

*Don't it make you wanna go home?'*

## 15. Chapter Fifteen

Eddie had been following that little sliver of dim light for a half mile, legs nearly giving out from under him as he clutched his aching stomach, bile crawling its way up his throat.

He was tempted to keel over and vomit— anything to rid of that horrible, stale taste in his mouth—it was like waking up with ten hangovers, and it absolutely sickened him. But he hadn't eaten anything in *weeks*, and he couldn't stand to imagine the physical toll dry retching would inflict upon him now, bruised and bloodied as he is. His whole body trembled weakly, and he could feel his pulse flickering under his skin, a sickly feverishness washing over him.

Eddie groaned lowly, swallowing thickly and trudging along.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, practically sizzling on the heated skin as his body creaked and protested to each falling step. His vision was starting to grow fuzzy at the edges— eyes heavy in their sockets as small circles of light danced around his field of sight like the Deadlights. His entire body ached— a dull and hot circle of pain radiating throughout his joints. His feet felt clumsy and heavy— as if weighed down by sandbags. He had a stubborn crick in his neck that he was too tired to do anything about, and he was soaked from head to toe in sewage water.

He felt like absolute shit.

He hadn't felt this shitty since freshman year of college when he had gotten drunk off his ass at a frat party his roommate dragged him to, and he had puked into the bushes before crying at the curb.

He remembered that night in fragments— like he was pulling memories out of that outer space, that disembodied recollection of events floating before his blurring eyes. His head ached just trying to make sense of it. Still, he furiously righted his capsizing mind, digging his feet harsher in the cold grit of the floor, as if to ground himself. His jaw ached. His tongue licked over a wound on the outside of his mouth.

And then he let himself slip into a memory, back to that night when...

*Eddie had been practically dragged out of his dormitory, out of that snug, sterile room and into the cold, harsh night. The air bit like a dog, and Eddie clearly remembered protesting as he left that safe, familiar building, into the unknown.*

He had been placed with a rowdy roommate— a real prick with a complete disregard for niceties and the invisible line that separated Eddie's side of the room from his own.

He'd picked enough pairs of the guy's dirty underwear off his own half of the floor to grow to not be fond of him. Still, though, there had been a certain kind of charm to him, beneath all that macho, disgusting outer layer, and maybe that's what stopped Eddie from turning back around and finishing his homework like he intended to that night.

Or maybe, and he wouldn't realise this for another twenty or so years, he had wanted, deep down, to rebel against his mother

How she would have hated the sight of her precious *Eddie-Bear* at a dingy, low-lit party—and a *frat* party at that. She would have paled at the sight of red solo cups like big, blaring alarms screeching through the dormitory walls. She would have screamed at the sight of horny teenagers pressed against each other on the walls like tapestry hangings.

It was everything Mrs. Kaspbrak hated and everything Eddie had ever been denied of.

And maybe that was why he had found himself running to keep up with his roommate that night, abandoning all previous initiations in the cool air as he stepped into that stuffy fraternity house. He would come running out of it even faster an hour or two later, Eddie remembered. But something had happened in between; something he hadn't cared enough to remember, or feared enough to forget.

He clenched his eyes even more, wading blindly through the last stretch of the sewers, and tried to recollect exactly what happened that night.

*They had walked through the beaten-up door of the house, and Eddie smelled the strong, heady scent of cheap alcohol immediately, permeating through his nostrils, sinking into his skin.*

*Isn't it bad to inhale alcohol?* He had thought desperately, mind scanning for red flags as the room suddenly seemed a lot smaller.

Before he could chicken out, a drink was being shoved in his hand—ambery brown and reeking of some kind of concoction of beer. Eddie

had hardly ever drank, and he'd certainly never gotten *drunk*.

"C'mon, Ed," his roommate had said, jostling him roughly in the shoulder, either not noticing or not caring when Eddie's body tensed reflexively, "what are you? A wuss?"

The words cut Eddie like a knife, slicing through that thick hesitation, springing a nerve deep inside him.

His childhood tormentors' voices rang distantly in his ears, yet never seemed quite so close, quite so dangerous.

*Mama's boy, faggot, sissy, wuss.*

He snapped.

*I'm not a wuss* , he thought hazily, tipping his head back as he chugged the drink, ambery liquid dripping anticlimactically down his chin.

"That's the spirit!" his friend— roommate, *acquaintance* ? had yelled, handing him another red solo cup before slipping into the crowd.

Alone and the furthest away from his comfort zone he could ever remember being, Eddie brought the cup to his lips, and started to drink.

---

Buzzed by the taste of alcohol and warmed by the slow drip of beer in his system, Eddie relaxed, if only momentarily.

He let his head lull back against the worn couch, letting his flushed cheek press into the cool leather as he watched the commotion unfold around him, a little woozy, and uncomfortably drunk. With the abundance of alcohol, can sometimes come an onslaught of anxiety. Eddie, having once had a panic attack after having two drinks in junior year of highschool, should have known that.

And he *would have*, if the man sprawled across the couch had been anything like Eddie. He was hot; dishevelled and reeking of beer. He made stupid decisions like going to frat parties. He forgot to call his mother to tell her he wouldn't be coming home tonight, even though he *always* did.

No, the man on the couch wasn't Eddie, but as he fled the room gripping his aspirator like a lifeline, he'd never felt more like himself.

He found a quiet, unoccupied corridor of the snaking house, pressing his back clumsily against the cool wall as he wheezed into his inhaler, a series of choked-off, spluttered coughs falling out of his mouth as the familiar taste flooded his mouth. He couldn't remember how long he'd stood there, huddled over his inhaler as he tried to rid of the weight on his lungs and the stars on his eyes. He couldn't place how long it'd been before someone else had walked into the room.

“Party’s the other way, I hate to break it to you, bud,” the man had said, and Eddie’s eyes flung open, his hands covering his trusty blue aspirator protectively.

And then he saw the playful smile on his face.

“I’m trying to get *away* from the party,” Eddie explained uselessly, hands rubbing his arms as he sighed shakily.

“Tough break for you then, running into me,” the guy had said, and then slumped opposite to Eddie, as if he hadn’t really meant it at all, “I’m a riot.”

Eddie rolled his eyes at that, muttering, “I’m sure you are,” before pausing, and then lamenting more to himself than the boy at this point, said offhandedly, “can’t a guy have an asthma attack in the middle of a frat party in peace?”

The boy had laughed, Eddie recalled. All teeth and bright sparkle in his hazed-over eyes.

“No, you really can’t,” he said, grabbing the aspirator out of Eddie’s hand before he could protest, turning it over in his palm, “y’know, people here would think that was a drug if they saw that,” he said honestly.



Eddie just scowled in disgust, and the man handed him back his inhaler, looking at him curiously.

“This isn’t your scene, is it?” he asked, letting his head lazily loll back against the pale wall.

Eddie’s grip had tightened over his inhaler, “No. Frankly, I don’t know what I’m even doing here.”

Of course, all of this was a refined version of whatever was really said, pulling whatever sensical fragments he could out of that slurred, languid drag of words.

“Talkin’ to me,” the guy had said, smiling lazily.

“What?” Eddie had replied dumbly.

“Talkin’ to me,” he continued, “tha’s what you’re doin,’ isn’t it?”

Eddie had looked at him blearily, hair mussed up as he carded a hand through it, temples pulsing, “I don’t know...*am I?*”

The guy had laughed again, genuine underneath that hazy cloud of booze, “Man, you are *so* drunk.”

Eddie had been focusing on trying to make a half-decent comeback to that when the thick smell of weed floated past him, and he looked over to see the guy smoking a blunt, a thin wisp of the smoke filtering out and under his nose.

Eddie inhaled sharply.

*When had he gotten that?*

“Oh, don’t look so scandalized,” he had scoffed, puffing nonchalantly, “your mom must have been a real hard-ass, huh?”

In that moment, it was like Eddie’s brain was urging him to get out. To find his roommate, thank him for a lovely night, and then get the hell out of here, scrubbing the night’s filth away in an hour-long shower. But he just slumped further against that wall, before saying plainly, “You have no idea.”

The man looked like he did have an idea. Or he didn’t and just didn’t care. Whichever one it was, he didn’t comment on it, simply nudging the smouldering blunt closer to him in offering.

“You want a drag?”

Amazingly, and not by his own volition, as if his body had been taken over by someone else, Eddie found himself reaching for the blunt and bringing it to his lips.

“I’m Matt, by the way.”

“Eddie,” he had murmured back quietly.

All he remembered was his hand falling slowly from his mouth as he handed back the cigar, breathing out a white cloud of smoke, and finally getting a good look at the guy.

*He had a grin so bright and mischievous it made Eddie want to reach for his fanny-pack, where a tiny First-Aid kit sat. His hair was unruly and dark, eyes just as deep. He didn’t know it at the time, but when the boy tipped his head back and laughed, he looked like the spitting image of—*

Richie, Eddie’s mind floated to. He wondered where Richie was. Of course, he wondered about the other Losers; if Ben and Bev had finally got together, if Bill ever wrote a good ending to his book, if Mike had moved to Florida like he dreamed he would.

But it all came back to Richie. Was he settled back in California, laughing easily into a microphone as he captivated the crowd? He had seemed so upset the last time Eddie saw him, so—

*Focus, Eddie* , he chided himself. And like floating into a dream, he let himself remember.

*He had stared hazily at the boy, squinting as he tried to focus his vision,*

*body feeling limp and entirely not his own. He remembered the stifling warmth between them, the heady smell of marijuana.*

He hadn't even noticed Matt get closer to him, the unbearable heat getting suffocatingly near as his hand brushed over his cheek.

"Say, what's a pretty boy like you doing at a party like this?" he murmured, eyes glazed over and lazy

Eddie hadn't even registered his breath fanning over his own lips until his thumb brushed across his cheekbone, eyes flicking to his lips.

"Wanna ditch this joint?"

And then, as if burned, Eddie had jumped away, stumbling to his feet as he bumped clumsily into the wall, hands thrown protectively in front of him. Beneath that haze of inebriation, his gaze was horrified, he just knew it.

"W-wha—" he spluttered, breath a tinsely wheeze in his throbbing chest, "what are you doing?"

The boy had just stared back at him, like he knew something Eddie didn't. Like he knew something about *Eddie* that Eddie didn't.

He remembered fleeing out of the house, pushing carelessly past a

mass of hot, drunken bodies as he flung himself into the cool grip of the night.

He had collapsed into the dewy grass, retching drily as his entire body shook, lips trembling as his cheek pulsed, the ghost of the boy's touch lingering on his cheek. Hot tears stung in his eyes as he sobbed miserably against the ground.

And then, with shaking hands and bleary eyes, he had dialled his mother's phone number.

Sick, and feeling more ashamed than he'd ever recalled feeling in his life, Eddie cried at the curb, and waited for his mom to bring him home.

---

As expected, Mrs. Kaspbrak had thrown a fit. Throughout the entire drive home, she lamented over the atrocious scene, peppering in a prolific arrangement of curses that could make a sailor faint.

Eddie was hardly listening as he let his head rest against the cool window pane of his mom's car, the bitter taste of bile coating his tongue as it mingled grossly with the flavour of weed and alcohol. He felt disgusting, in more ways than one. He could hardly look his mother in the eye as she fawned over him, hot rollers pinned into her hair, nightgown falling familiarly over her large form.

He remembered being forced into bed and given a myriad of pills, all

while his mother scolded him— *scalded* him, listing all the different horrible diseases he exposed himself to by going to that party.

“You didn’t drink, did you, Eddie? Because you could get liver cirrhosis and die!” she said, listing moralities like she was giving a sermon as she bumbled about the room, fussing over Eddie as she loaded him up with medicine.

She look at him scrutinizingly, and Eddie couldn’t help but cower at the gaze in his hazy field of vision. It pierced through that cloud of uncertainty like a pin to a balloon.

“You didn’t *kiss* anyone, did you, Eddie?” she asked suddenly, and Eddie's stomach rolled sickeningly.

He slunk under her oppressive watch, and then, like a dam breaking, he began to cry.

As a look of silent resignation passed over Sonia Kaspbrak’s eyes that night, she placed a washcloth against Eddie’s forehead.

*Tripping in that haze, floating in that disembodied feeling, Eddie took in a hitching breath and he leaned into that cold press of—*

Water. Eddie’s feet tripped blindly over the pass of shallow concrete, landing face first into the canal. His arm came out to break the fall, and he felt a familiar ache radiate up his shoulder as his old fracture was reacquainted. He could hear the cicadas burring lowly around

him, the lazy splash of the water as it lapped at the shore. He bet that if he turned his head right now, he would see that evening sky above him, littered with stars.

Eddie laughed, and then the world went black.

## 16. Chapter Sixteen

*[Sprawled haphazardly atop his bed, Richie Tozier slept a fitful sleep. Grime covered nearly every surface of his body, and he was in desperate need of a shower. As he lay there, Beverly Marsh was just beginning to dial his number, nestled in the taxi cab with the other Losers as they returned to Derry for the very last time.]*

He didn't wake up at the first ring. In fact, it took three rings for him to be roused from his sleep, and it wasn't until another three rounds of that before he picked up the phone.

"What?" he said, almost snarling into the receiver.

His entire body ached, heavy with exhaustion, but there existed no pain worse than his splintered heart, a dull weight in his chest. His hands trembled where they weakly held the phone to his ear. Even as he listened, he felt his eyes droop shut once again.

"Richie," Beverly said patiently, "I need you to meet us at the Jade of the Orient restaurant...you know, the one we met at before..."

*Before we fought IT,* the sentence finished in Richie's head.

"Us?" Richie croaked, sitting up straighter, paying no mind to the head-rush he got as he forced his aching body up.

"They came, Richie," she said, voice breathy with relief, as if a bowling ball of stress weighing on her for weeks had simply rolled off



in that one moment, “they’re all back.”

He waited in bated breath, oxygen a sharp stab in his throat as he swallowed roughly. His throat hurt to no end in that special kind of rawness that came from holding back tears.

He missed her next words in a flurry of bleary thoughts.

“What?” he said dumbly, furiously pushing away the last dredges of fatigue.

“Jade of the Orient. Do you need a ride or can you make it there yourself?”

But Richie hardly heard her, blood roaring in his ears as he fisted a hand in his hair, letting it slip down his face in a rough trail down his cheek. Heat flared in its wake.

“But, Eds—“

“Will you be there?” Beverly interrupted him.

Richie pinched the skin between his eyes between his fingers, letting his shoulders slump from where they were tensed around his face.

“Fine. Yes, I’ll be there.”

Rolling out of bed, Richie scowled in disgust at the filthy trail of grime left behind on the sheets where his soaked clothes had pressed into. It looked akin to those old-timey Sunday cartoons he used to watch as a kid, when the character would faceplant into the ground and leave a person-shaped hole.

He might have laughed about it once, but all he did was sigh, ripping the covers off the bed and dumping them into the laundry basket.

“*God-fucking-dammit !*” he muttered before throwing himself under the cold assault of the shower, paying no mind to the way it seared his cool skin, stinging against his frozen cheeks like acid rain.

He scrubbed fervently, until his skin was red and raw, and then he let himself slide down the tiled walls, wrapping his arms tightly around his knees. He bowed his head, as if in prayer, and let the cool water wash away the day’s events.

---

*[A few miles away, the Losers sat around a large rectangular table, picking at their appetizers. In the space between Bill and Beverly sat an empty seat. Richie was nowhere to be found, and his noodles were quickly growing cold.]*

“You think he’s gonna show up?” Bill said, swallowing a bite of lo mein as he wiped his mouth with a white linen napkin.

“Of course he will,” Beverly said, looking hesitant before adding, “it’s *Eddie*.”

Bill bit his lip, remembering that night when everything changed. Well, that was subjective, he supposed— one could argue that the moment that everything *really* changed was the moment they all met twenty seven years ago, completing a circle of which they had been entirely unaware of, that would strip Derry down to its bare, rigid bones. But he knew what he meant by the sentiment, and for that, he stood by it fiercely. The moment that their group of six had turned to five, just days after it had been demoted from seven. The cards of the game folding as the scoreboard ran unsettlingly empty, leaving behind a mere shell of what once was.

Yes, he remembered that moment all too clearly. The moment everything had changed.

He recalled helping Ben and Mike drag Richie’s planted form away from Eddie’s lifeless body and away from the sewers, which had begun to crumble above them as the Neibolt House stood on its last legs.

He remembered the screams— the awful, *haunting* screams as Richie kicked and protested, nails digging into Bill’s shoulder like talons as he cried.

*Eds, Eddie, no! Guys, please, no, we can still save him! We can still— Eddie!*

He thought he might never get that sound out of his head, because

the thing about trauma is that it echoes; pulsing down the years like a cancer until one day you realize you've married your own childhood monsters.

He thought of when he was a child— flying down the broken roads of Derry, racing to beat the Devil, the wind whipping through his body like a belt. Maybe you couldn't outrun your demons, Bill thought distantly, because maybe if you were still trying to escape your past, you were already stuck in it. If you were still running from monsters, you were afraid of them. And everyone knows fear is the way they get you, in the end.

*There are things worse than It*, and this goes way deeper than that, Bill thought with devout certainty, and then he took another drink.

Mike pursed his lips, chewing absentmindedly on an egg roll, "So, what's the move here, Bev? How are we gonna find him?"

The rest of the Losers turned to Beverly expectantly, and she swallowed thickly, looking down at her plate before casting her eyes at each one of them in turn.

"I don't know," she sighed, "in my visions...it looked like he was still down there in the sewers."

"Maybe we should check there first then," Mike concluded, jaw set in loyal determination, always ready to do the right thing, "I mean, that would make the most sense, right?"

“Right,” Beverly echoed, “the sewers...that’s where we left...” her breath hitched, voice cracking as she finished quietly, “where we left him when he died.”

“Jesus Christ,” Mike breathed, pinching the bridge of his nose as he sighed into his hands, scrubbing them over his face.

“H-How can we be sure he’s even alive?” Bill blurted out, as if each individual word was tripping over the next, “What if he’s...what if he’s d-d-duh—“

“He’s *alive*,” Beverly said sharply, taking a quick swig of her wine, disregarding the comforting hand that Ben placed on her shoulder.

A thick tension took to the room, the quiet clinking of silverware doing little to break up the suffocating silence that clamped its cold, frigid hand over their throats.

Bill mindlessly raked a fork through his hoisin sauce, avoiding the eyes of the other Losers, who looked just as on-edge. There was just something unnerving about being back in your hometown, and the discomfort in the room was palpable, stiflingly so.

“*He has to be*,” Beverly whispered, so quiet it was almost lost to their ears. But it wasn’t— they all heard. Easing into the slow silence, they picked up their chopsticks and waited for Richie to arrive.

---

By the time Richie arrived at the Jade of the Orient restaurant, the rest of the Losers had relaxed, settling back into their old routine as a pleasant conversation took the reigns of the room.

Ben had an arm slung around Beverly, who eased into it acceptingly, leaning towards him like they were magnets; floating in that bonding force between them.

Bill shot a wide grin at Mike, who returned it just as brightly. Their eyes were turned up at the corners— and a cheerful glimmer threatened to spill over them as their smiles played at their face.

Richie stood at the front of all of this, suddenly feeling like he'd made a grave mistake of coming here.

Just as he was about to say '*fuck it*' and leave, they turned to him like a sunflower to the sun. Like the petals of a flower, their faces opened up, sympathy flooding their expression as Richie shoved his hands deeper in his pockets.

He twitched.

And then someone spoke.

"Heyyyy, Trashmouth!" Bill said easily, clearly a little tipsy on the whiskey in front of him.

Richie just bit his lip, reluctantly accepting a seat as Beverly gestured to a spot between her and Bill. They all looked rather good, all things considered.

Mike was wearing a pale blue dress-shirt, beard clean-shaven and immaculate. His skin glowed from the Floridan climate, teeth and eyes blindingly, healthily white.

Bill looked nice in his navy sweater, the pressed collar of his white shirt peeking out at the neckline, stubble slightly overgrown in that way that told everyone he was an author, the slight dark circles under his eyes only driving the point home. Ben looked well taken care of, as one would expect from the successful man he was. He wore a grey button-down, cuffed at the forearms as he nursed a beer in one hand, the other resting on Beverly's lower back.

Beverly was ethereal as always— red hair falling in soft waves down her shoulders, pinned back with a small gold pin and having grown since the last time they met. She wore a delicate white blouse, trimmed with detail at the neckline. A small emerald necklace hung daintily between her breasts, a gift from Ben, no doubt, and her eyes of the same colour peered back at him curiously. She looked radiant as ever— pale skin gentle under the light, cheeks flushed with colour.

Her fingers twitched in a gesture Richie recognized as a tic that resonated from the deep desire for a cigarette.

Instinctively, Richie reached for a cigarette from his pocket, cupping his hands around it as he coaxed the end to light before self-consciously rubbing a hand over his face. He knew how he looked.

It was like the original meeting, that first time back in Derry. Ben was hot, Bill and Beverly put-together as always, and then there was Richie, less favoured by the passages of time.

The only difference was now the Losers did little to hide their stares at Richie, and he knew he didn't look well— in fact, that was the *reason* they were all here.

His five-o'clock shadow threatened to crawl down his neck, and his eyes were ringed with ugly bruises that came from the lack of sleep. He had a colourful array of contusions spilling out from under his jacket, having grown from his trip to the sewers. And that was only on the *outside*. His entire body thrummed like a hidden pulse was wriggling under his skin— which managed to hurt too. His legs seared and ached with every shift in his seat, and he felt as though he would slump over and collapse like a rag-doll at any given moment.

Richie puffed a spit of smoke out of the cigarette, his eyes daring anyone to mention the '*no-smoking*' sign on the wall.

No one did, instead, Ben looked sympathetically at him and said, "How are you doing, Richie?"

He laughed drily, smoke filtering lazily out of the end of the drag and towards the ceiling, "How am *I* doing? Look at me, man. I thought Big Bill was the one who had trouble with the ol' peepers."

He glanced pointedly at the stylish wire-rimmed glasses that lay upturned in front of Bill. Nobody laughed at the joke.



“Huh. Tough crowd,” he babbled, seemingly unable to stop his mouth now that he’d gotten it started, silently willing it to shut up as his words ran away from him. He desperately needed to fill that overwhelming silence. Needed them to stop looking at him like that; like he was going to break. Because he was one sympathetic look away from losing it completely, and then they would all *know*.

“It’s okay, Richie,” Beverly said softly, and Richie forced himself to relax in his chair. He understood what she meant:

*Beep beep, Richie.*

“You’re right though, Trashmouth,” Bill said good-naturedly, “I’m bound to go blind with all the time I’ve been spending in front of my computer the past few weeks.”

Beverly turned to him, rapt fascination in her eyes that told you everything you needed to know. The constellation in her eyes may have lead her to Ben, but the first star started with Bill, and still burned just as bright, deep down inside.

“You figure out a good ending for your story yet, Big Bill?”

He chuckled, “Well, to figure out a good ending, I need a beginning first. I’m scrapping the whole project and starting it again.”

“Really?” Ben said, clearly intrigued as he leaned forward. He owned

a great deal of Bill's books, perhaps more than any other of the Losers.

"Yeah, Audra..." he looked conflicted, "she hated that ending."

He let out a mirthless laugh, and Richie didn't miss the way he said Audra's name, as if it stung to speak.

*Audra.*

He briefly wondered if they'd split.

"What about you, Mike?" he said quickly, obviously attempting to divert the conversation away from the subject of him and his wife, "How's Florida?"

Mike smiled easily, "Oh, you know how it is. Sunny every day— what a life, huh?"

All the Losers smiled except for Richie, though a warm fondness seeped gently across his chest. They all were happy to see Mike happy. It hadn't always been so easy for him.

"What about you, Ben?" Mike grinned devilishly.

“And what *about* me?” Ben said humorously, the group dissolving into laughter as they hooted and hollered, jostling Ben’s built shoulders in playful affection.

Richie exhaled from his nose, fingers digging into the white paper of his cigarette. His nostrils flared, eyebrows knitting together, creasing lines through his forehead.

His hand trembled.

“Oh, you know, he’s just sitting around looking pretty,” Beverly laughed, “that used to be my job!”

“Still is!” Ben said sappily, taking her under his arm, “Boy am I glad I found her—“

Richie’s fists collided harshly with the table, a rigid, searing pain melting over his knuckles as the Losers turned to look at him in shock.

His lip wobbled, legs unsteady beneath him where he stood. Since when was he standing? His cigarette was burning a brand into his palm. Richie’s entire body trembled as he looked at them, betrayal scrawled across his face like a guilty marker of his *dirty little secret*.

“Do any of you even *care* about Eddie?” he said, furious, but his resolve crumbled under the insistent assault of tears from a reservoir that never seemed to drain lately.

Hot tears streaked a blazing trail down his cheeks, “Do any of you care that he’s *alone* and *scared* and you’re standing by while it happens?”

They watched him, speechless, pink shame flushing their faces as their eyes remained glued to Richie’s.

“Do you even *remember* what Eddie was like? He would have *hated* being in that place! You *know* he would have! And— and—“ he took in a hitching breath, sobs erratic and choked now, “now we’re what? Abandoning him again?”

Nobody dared to interrupt him as he trembled and shook like an epileptic in front of them. Richie seemed to be talking more to himself than them at this point.

“Well, you might be fine with that, but I sure as hell am not! I thought the point of you all coming down here was to help Eddie, not talk about your own lives, because guess what— not *everyone* got to fucking *move on!*”

His shoulders heaved up and down as he tried to pull air into his lungs, looking like how Eddie did as a kid when he needed his inhaler. This only made him cry harder and through an onslaught of tears, croaked out:

“Do you know how hard it is? I go home and...” he panted, voice strained, “all I see is that Eddie’s not there. His clothes, his compass,”

he touched the chain around his neck pointedly, "...even his *stupid* inhaler, but...he isn't."

Richie's face was flushed, and his eyes were shameful under the dam of tears bubbling up over them and coursing down his cheeks. He had ripped his heart out of his chest and laid the broken, pulsing mess out for all of them to see.

The Losers gaped at it. Richie cried harder.

"You may not wanna go back there," he said, voice wobbling, "but I'll be *damned* if I let him die by himself again."

Once he found himself able to move away from that horrible paralysis, Richie stormed out of the room, Bill clamping a hand over his shoulder in attempt to stop him. He shook his hand off, practically seething as he yelled, "Do *not* fucking touch me!"

"Richie!" Beverly called desperately after him, and he distantly heard them pushing out of their seats.

Richie just ignored those pleading voices, slipping out into that cool, unforgiving night, and running away as fast as he could.

Unbeknownst to Richie as he fled down the desolate roads of Derry, he was leading himself away from the canal, where an unconscious Eddie lay.

Richie ran, and twelve miles away, Eddie twitched in his sleep.

## 17. Chapter Seventeen

*[Left side of his face pressed into the rushing water of the canal, Eddie lay unmoving by the bank. His body hurt— even while dreaming, and he was groaning quietly as he did just that. The Losers had just hastily paid the bill at the Jade of the Orient, and Richie was taking off the other way. Sleep weigh heavily on him, and the night was quiet. The same, however, could not be said about the dream plaguing his mind]*

Eddie found himself back in the sewers, the rushing water around him doing nothing to placate the uncanny resemblance his dream took form in. Eddie was cold and scared, and once again, all alone.

He shivered in that dark, dank tunnel, clothes frozen to his skin. Water dripped lowly down the grates of the sewers, stuttering occasionally, and the beat of Eddie's heart followed suit. His heart—it felt like a wet, pulsing lump lodged in his throat as he trembled, looking around the room. Distantly, he heard the sound of running water— different from the pattern he'd gotten used to over his time down there. No, it wasn't the hesitant, slow drip of run-off sewage he had become acquainted with, but a sound much more sure and steady.

It almost sounded like...

*Like someone running a bath* , Eddie thought breathlessly.

He screwed his eyes shut, side of his hand reaching over and brushing the skin of his nose, which was frozen to the touch. His vision swam along to the roar of blood in his ears.

Staggering forward, Eddie followed the noise.

It lead him down the winding, scrawled paths of the sewers, past the side routes and into a small room of the left, roughly the size of a bathroom. Eddie peered inside, and his breath caught in his chest, bile crawling up his throat as he swallowed thickly, chest heaving in silent terror.

There, in water the colour of blood, lay a pale looking man slumped over the ceramic rim of the bath, eyes fluttered shut, wrists weeping from large gash wounds.

Eddie trembled, stepping forward, feet wading through the water where it had overrun onto the tiled floor. He peered down at the man, and he froze, paralyzed where his feet stood planted in the ground.

The man's eyes flew open, water sloshing as he came to, gripping the edges of the bath in a death-grip. A ragged wheeze of a breath ripped through his chest as he looked at Eddie with a mix of terror and shock.

*Stan* , Eddie though distantly, before the image faded out.

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*[Just moments after Richie had stormed out, the Losers had left the Jade*



*of the Orient restaurant, hastily leaving a generous amount of bills on the table before rushing outside, trying to keep up with Richie. The cold air nipped at their skin, and they walked faster through the parking lot, drawing their coats nearer to their chest]*

“This is so awful,” Ben said sombrely, looking a bit like a lost puppy dog, “I hate this.”

“I know,” Beverly said, breathing out into the sharp air, her cheeks cooled by the breeze, “but nobody hates this as much as Richie, believe me.”

“I’m just surprised he stayed in Derry,” Mike said, shivering, “I thought he was like, really big in California. He’s a disc jockey or something, right?”

“Of course he stayed, Mike.”

Mike, having witnessed a full twenty seven years of the horrors the town could bring and having done the duty of staying back in their hometown to keep watch was slow to understand why anyone would willingly stay in Derry.

“I just don’t get it,” Mike sighed, “It’s not coming back— we know that for sure now. It’s not like we have to keep w—“

“H-He stayed because he l-luh-loved him,” Bill interrupted.

His voice was quiet, and it seemed to become a catalyst for a continued silence as the Losers shuffled forward, the three of them none the wiser and Mike looking like someone dropped a bomb on him.

“Oh,” was all he said, and that was the last word said before they piled into Bill’s car and pulled out of the parking lot.

Starting towards the canal, they drove off into the night.

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Richie slumped like a cripple as he dragged his feet tiredly across the cracked roads of Derry. He felt like he’d been hit by a bus; all his previous injuries that had receded after a long rest coming back full force. There wasn’t a bone in Richie’s body that didn’t hurt.

He gazed tiredly at the blur of buildings just beyond the road—encapsulating it like a picture frame. He watched the structures pass with little interest, if only to pass the time, if only to distract from the weak tremble of his heart and the pinpricks of heat settling in his joints. Richie walked, and he didn’t stop until he came across a familiar face; its boarded up windows glaring into his soul like lifeless eyes, the rotted wood barriers sagging as the weeds attempted to drag the dilapidated building back to the weeds, where it would make the earth its grave.

He started towards the building, hands shoved into his pockets as he made his way across the street. He walked that gravel road until he

was standing in front of his childhood's true home;

*The Derry arcade .*

Loose, rusty nails protruded from the loose planks, teeth marks embedded into the bronzing metal where the claw of a hammer had failed to pull them out. Loose newspapers lay sprawled at the foot of the door, skittering across the sidewalk like travelling gypsies.

Beneath the window and beneath his feet, broken glass covered the ground, crunching as he slowly sidled up to the building.

Shifting his weight and tentatively grasping the empty frame of the exposed lower window, Richie hauled himself up, ducking as he climbed in through the gap, shattering small bits of broken glass as his feet connected with the floor. The wood groaned under his feet, like a creature who had been sleeping for years and was unhappy to be woken up. A thick layer of grime coated the walls, dust-bunnies running rampant through the corners of the room.

It was still as beautiful to Richie as it had been the first day it opened. It was just as beautiful as he remembered it being that fateful night.

*It was early July of 1989, just shortly after they had defeated It for the first time. The seemingly endless expanse of summer rolled out before them like an ornate carpet— a sentiment older than time itself.*

Richie had been walking Eddie home after the rest of the Losers parted ways, retreating inside for the night. As they passed by the small strip of buildings, Richie came to a screeching halt, Eddie continuing on for a few more steps before turning around with his hands on his hips and sighing, "What?"

Richie had grinned, pointing at the slightly ajar window, cloudy with sticky fingerprints where kids would press their palms against as they peered into the arcade after close.

"No!" Eddie said firmly, squaring his jaw and shaking his head adamantly, the last rays of the setting sun rippling across his face as he frowned at Richie, crossing his arms across his chest, "No way! It's closed for a reason, dipshit!"

"Awe, come on, Eds, let loose a little! The night is young!" Richie cajoled, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"You know, if that fucking clown was still alive, this kind of bullshit would have gotten us killed."

"I'm not hearing a no," Richie said flippantly, beginning to wiggle the window open.

Eddie frowned at the side of his head not obscured by his thick mass of unruly black curls, "Is that what you tell girls?"

"Only your mom, Eds," Richie winked, pushing the window all the

way open and grinning at him triumphantly.

“Beep beep, Richie,” Eddie muttered, but he moved to stand underneath the window alongside him.

“You’re coming? That’s the spirit!” Richie crowed, and beneath that smug grin, there had been a very real sense of fondness and joy. He smacked Eddie’s fanny playfully, “Well? Get in there, Eds!”

“Don’t call me Eds,” he muttered, before Richie was helping to boost him through the window, slipping through the small opening and into the arcade.

Richie grinned to himself, following with significantly less finesse, clumsily tucking in his long, awkward limbs as he clambered inside, landing on the ground with a triumphant smile. Eddie was wandering around, peering into the darkness as he scanned the various games. His legs looked almost ghostly pale under those bright red short shorts, and Richie tugged his eyes away.

“Hey, Eds! Look, Street Fighter!”

He ran over the familiar machine, seeing his grinning reflection in the grey screen. Eddie sidled up next to him, squinting at it and scrunching up his nose.

“It’s not even on, idiot.”

Richie had ducked down so fast he nearly smacked his head against the console as he retrieved a long cord, plugging it in the socket and looking up pointedly at Eddie when the familiar colours loaded onto the screen.

“The wonders of technology, huh, Eds?”

“Oh, shut up,” Eddie had muttered, “how do you even play this game anyway?”

“Prepare to have your world rocked, Eddie Spaghetti,” Richie grinned, and he could have sworn he saw a glimmer of fondness in Eddie’s eyes before he trained his gaze back on the screen.

---

Eddie had picked up the game rather quickly, nimble fingers flying over the brightly coloured buttons as he beat up Richie’s character, a determined expression painted over his face.

He smashed his fist down on the blue button, the health meter on Richie’s side depleting to zero, reigning Eddie victorious.

“*Ha!*” he yelled, smiling so bright it almost hurt, that blinding sunshine poring through Richie’s eyes, fanning a flame that already

burned in Richie's heart, ravaging him whole, "I won!"

He turned to face Richie in almost slow motion, and he could have sworn there was a ring of white light surrounding him. In that moment, Richie saw no one else.

He gazed at him in wonder, before softly breathing, "Eds?"

Eddie's proud grin remained plastered across his face, and his eyes twinkled back, "Yeah, Rich?"

Richie bit his lip, wanting nothing more than to reach out into that dim lighting and kiss Eddie Kaspbrak until the sun started to rise again outside. He ached to touch his cheek, stroking a thumb under his eye and breathing, *Eddie, Eddie, Eds*, until the words had no meaning, until the world ran out of time.

Instead, he said, "Wanna play another round?"

Eddie snorted, fishing another coin out of his pocket as the screen roared to life. Richie had lost again that day, because his eyes kept drifting to the boy beside him, and the way the soft glow of the Street Fighter machine illuminated his face.

*Richie watched the machine numbly, silently willing it to come to life. He found his eyes squeezing shut, lids heavy under the sudden assault of exhaustion. His body thrummed with a fresh wave of pain as he leaned to kneel down.*

Richie had hardly touched his knees to the filthy ground before his phone rang loudly in his pocket, buzzing insistently against his side. Maybe it was the culmination the past few days' events that urged him to pick up that phone, or maybe deep down inside, he knew it was important.

Either way, he raised it to his ear and said slowly, "Look, I don't want to t—"

"Richie," Beverly said, voice faint, like she might disturb something important if she spoke any louder, "you need to come down to the canal. Right now."

"Beverly, I don't want to talk —"

"Richie," she said louder, voice rising in panic, speaking faster, as if afraid he would hang up on her, "You need to come down."

Richie frowned at the floor, listening to her shaky breaths as she said:

*"Richie, you need to come down...because we found Eddie's body."*



## 18. Chapter Eighteen

### Summary for the Chapter:

After nearly thirty thousand words and seventeen chapters, Richie and Eddie are finally going to be in the same room as each other. I'll admit, I had a few good chucks over a few of you affectionately (albeit annoyedly) referring to my fic as 'the slowest slowburn i've ever read,' but now it's time to give the people what they want.

Alexa, play Reunited and It Feels So Good.

By the time Richie arrived at the canal, he somehow managed to be in worse shape than he had been before he left. Cool sweat froze against his flank as it beaded steadily from the crook of his arm. His hair was mussed and unruly from carding his fingers through it the entire taxi ride.

Oh yeah, the taxi ride. The words, '*Eddie* ,' and '*body* ,' and '*found* ,' had hardly come out of Beverly's mouth before Richie ran out onto the street, nearly getting hit by a lorry as he flagged down a slow-moving cab, puttering along as if it had nowhere important to be.

*Well, you do now* , Richie had thought dizzily, wringing sores into his own palms as he yanked and prodded at his own fingers, clumsily falling into the backseat.

"Where to?" the balding driver had asked rather calmly, sipping from the largest cup of coffee Richie had ever seen.

The sharp, warm smell of dark brew enveloped him like a seductress,

and he struggled to keep his eyes open as he leaned into the scent and the emanating warmth of the car.

Richie very nearly snatched the cup out of the man's plump hands, but decided against it as his stomach rolled uneasily.

"The canal!" Richie said plainly, hissing through his teeth as his fingers brushed over a small wound on his palm.

"Oh, you mean along the Kenduskeag?" the cabbie inquired nonchalantly, clearly in no rush.

Richie could tell he was gearing up for a languid, easy chat about everything and nothing, and stopped the train in its tracks before it derailed.

"Yes, of course the Kenduskeag you idiot! Where the hell else?"

He felt the man raise his eyebrows questioningly in the rearview mirror, but the toll-free number advertised to drunks printed on the car door told Richie he'd been on the receiving end of worse interactions before. He looked more intrigued than anything.

Despite that, the car still idled, and Richie, feeling a little more than desperate and an ugly conglomeration of emotions brewing sickeningly in his stomach, apologized.

“Sorry. I mean, no. I’m not sorry!” he inhaled sharply through his nose, face crumpling up with frustration as he managed:

“I have had the *worst* fucking month and I’ve had a *godawful* day! I’ve been playing phone-tag for the past forty-eight hours, waded through someone else’s piss and shit, and now I’ve gotta go see someone and I’ll be *damned* if I miss them again! So please, sir, for the love of God and Joseph and everything holy— *step on it!*”

The cabbie pursed his lips before appearing to shrug, and then leaned forward into the pedal until they were rolling down the streets of Derry, cutting a blind trail through the night.

Richie’s chest heaved as his breath warbled in his throat. Deep lines cut across his forehead, etching themselves into his skin. He felt as though he had aged ten years in the span of a month, no, scratch that — in the span of a day. He let his head loll heavily against the window, letting out a dull clunking sound as he relinquished all control over his body. He allowed his temple to rest on the fingerprint clouded window, feeling the low, occasional jolt or rumble of the tires running over a pothole.

The streets were irrefutable cracked.

Everything in Derry was broken.

With that somber thought, he let his aching eyes shutter shut. Shutter —yes. Like the blinds of a window. Richie had felt uncomfortably exposed all day, baring all his dirty laundry to the whole goddamn world. He was shutting the curtains and he was locking everyone else

out for one fucking second. It was the kind of tired that forced your eyes to not so much as flutter— but rather, slam shut. A dull ache took to the bridge of your nose, resonating in that little junction between your brows. All you wanted to do was shut the world out and retreat into that brooding, whole darkness. That welcome respite of silence. And yet, flashes of light seemed to swim behind your lids, coaxing you into taking everything in until your eyes bled and your vision swam.

*I think , Richie thought to himself, it would be better not to see at all, because then, he elaborated, you couldn't know what you were missing.*

*Who you were missing.*

Still, he gave into that aching, longing pain and let himself dissolve in a memory. Whether he had any control over it and was simply indulging his own hurt or it was as unstoppable as the rolling tides, he just didn't know.

Nevertheless, he squeezed his eyes shut and let the past take hold of him.

*They had been young , Richie remembered. Just barely cresting onto the awkward, rolling hill that was puberty. Thirteen impeded on the last breath of their closing childhood, the curtain call for naivety maybe, but certainly not for teenage idiocy, which would stay a loyal contender for years to come.*

Changes rolled over the horizon like a bad omen, like a stormcloud gathering force as it shaded over the warm shore.

Not that any part of their childhood had been comparable to a day at the beach— far from it, but maybe, Richie thought, there always existed some part of you, deep down inside, that made you want to believe that summer could last forever, and the winding paths of the future would be sun-lit and easy.

Summer couldn't last forever, but it very well seemed like it had that day, that year. The year of 1989.

As all good things tend to do, that August heat had melted into September breeze— the sun a bronze medallion suspended halfway in the sky, as if it couldn't be bothered to hang at full-mast.

School encroached on the warm, comfortable embrace of longer days, and like all kids, Richie wasn't going to let summer go quietly into the night.

But then again, when had Richie ever done anything quietly?

"I can't believe summer's almost over," Richie groaned, throwing a dramatic hand over his face, as if he were a fainting fair maiden.

Under any other circumstances, Eddie would have said just that, but it was sure to be retorted back with an unbridled comment about how Eddie should come and save him, which would surely have resulted in a ridiculous request for a saving kiss. He would have declined, obviously. He always did, punching Richie square in the shoulder and giving him one of his patented, 'shut the fuck up,

dickbag' looks reserved specifically for the Trashmouth Tozier.

But Eddie's mom was in the front seat, already casting vengeful eyes back at Richie through the rearview mirror, so he opted not to humour Richie in the way he normally would.

Richie had knocked his glasses askew with a dull, humorous sounding '*clunk*,' and Eddie huffed sharply, righting them on his face.

He did stuff like that sometimes, and sometimes, there was fondness behind those brown eyes, mingling within that exasperated sigh, pinpointed somewhere in his voice as he said, '*you're an idiot*.'

It was in those moments that Richie felt his heart twitching in his chest, heat flooding his freckled cheeks in splatters of pink.

Along with the peril that was puberty came an onslaught of new—no, heightened emotions. Everything just became more pronounced; those gangly limbs of his seeming increasingly clumsy, his trashmouth growing even trashier, and that flickering heat in the pit of his belly he felt around Eddie growing into this wildfire that seared his insides and pulsed down his groin. Eddie was growing up—maybe not in the obvious ways that Richie was, with that scraggly facial hair starting to wisp across his face, or his clumsily deepening voice, but a change was happening. He had grown maybe half an inch taller and increasingly bold at that.

His mother's incessant helicopter-parenting seemed to hardly faze him anymore, hardly humouring her with a half-hearted, '*I'm fine, Ma*,' when he even responded at all.

Freckles had started to lightly dust his nose, skin warm and tan from the sun spilling across it all summer down by the quarry. The most noticeable change, however, was the soft brown curls that had started to appear at the ends of Eddie's hair.

Richie had hardly noticed the change, until he did. And then it was *all* he seemed to be able to notice.

It did nothing to placate the ache in Richie's lower gut, or the tug at his heart whenever Eddie was around. If anything, it had worsened it — boiling his insides until he was nothing but a heated mess of raging hormones with a trash-mouth and a boner. He spared a glance at the boy beside him, yellow shirt tucked into those horrible red short-shorts he always wore. He looked away guiltily.

Richie adjusted his glasses himself, needlessly, and looked at Eddie with a trained gaze as he huffed out a response.

"Do you really want to stay in that summer any longer?" Eddie inquired, sounding genuinely curious as he cast a glance at Richie, "Don't you want a change?"

*A change? Richie remembered thinking. I don't know if I could handle any more change, Eds. I think I'd be perfectly happy floating in this fucked-up limbo of a summer if I only got to immortalize your bitchy comebacks and the way the sun glints off your eyes forever.*

Sure, there exists no memories without a future to hold them in, but

a future meant an eventual end—an end Richie wasn't ready to face. He had looked into the cruel, unforgiving eyes of fear itself, and still found himself trembling in the face of the passage of time. If *It* had really wanted to scare Richie, he should have played upon that fear; the undeniable fact that time was passing Richie by and the world would turn around and leave him there, forever stuck in the past.

But then again, how could you personify such a thing?

If *It* had really wanted to scare him, all he had to do was conjure up a reality in which Eddie ceased to be within reach. In which Eddie, too, had grown tired of Richie 'Trashmouth' Tozier.

*I don't want us to change, Eds*, the words formed on his tongue.

Instead, he said, "Well I'm sure gonna miss those short skirts Greta Bowie wears," whistling lowly.

He got a firm slap to his arm from Eddie, his wild eyes imploring and livid as he bored a hole through the side of Richie's face.

Richie smiled.

Mrs. Kaspbrak gasped.

"Eddie!" she screeched, swivelling her head around briefly before returning her gaze to the carpool lane, fat hands strangling the worn



leather of the steering wheel, “This is why you can’t hang around this Tozier boy!”

*Such a bad influence* , her words rang in the air, and, *he will be finding his own ride to school if he keeps that up.*

“And don’t tell me you’ve been looking up girls’ skirts, Eddie!” she continued, fuming.

Richie bit back a laugh at the thought of prude little Eddie Kaspbrak trying to sneak a peek up Greta Bowie’s tartan kilts. Eds could never be a Peeping Tom—the sound of his aspirator shooting down his mouth would ring out, giving him away immediately like a blazing red sign reading, ‘*VIRGIN.*’

Mrs. Kaspbrak was giving Eddie’s nerve more credibility than Richie or anyone who actually knew Eddie ever would, and maybe that’s what caused Eddie to simply relax into his seat, fingers wrapping around Richie’s forearm.

Richie had looked at him with flushed cheeks, nervously knocking his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, trying to meet Eddie’s gaze. But he had simply sat there, watching the horizon.

*For once in his life, Richie was speechless.*

He pushed the last tangled arms of that memory away as the car began to slow down, his head rising instinctively away from the window as he fumbled for his seatbelt.

When the canal finally came into view, Richie hardly waited for the cab to roll to a stop before he was fleeing the backseat, stumbling ungracefully onto the tarmac. He fisted a hand in his pocket and pulled out a few crumpled dollar bills and a stray cigarette, placing them into the fat hands of the taxi driver.

On a second thought, he plucked the smoke from the cabbie's clammy palms, shoving it haphazardly in his mouth, muttering, "I'll take that."

The driver just gave him one last curious glance and a nod before speeding away, Richie skidding down the lopsided hill where the gravel met the water, sending a line of small jagged rocks skittering down below. He nursed that white paper cigarette in his mouth, clumsily fumbling with his lighter as the match protested against the cool air of the night.

But it was all in vain, because it dropped in a nosedive from his lips as soon as he saw the crouched figures huddling around a body half-submerged in the canal.

*Eddie* , Richie thought breathlessly.

He staggered forward, time seeming to slow down as his pulse twitched weakly under his skin. Blood swam inside his ears and distantly, he could hear a faint sort of ringing. The air weighed thickly on his legs, paralyzing him like sandbags as he moved closer.

All he could think was, *oh my God, please let him be alive. Please, Eds, please be alive, please let him be alive.*

He fell to his knees at the edge of the river, between Bill and Mike, who were looking solemnly down at him as they pumped his chest with overlayed hands, eyes glassy and frozen.

“Eds!” Richie cried out, pushing past their hands, gripping Eddie’s drenched sweater in his hands, shaking him, “Is he okay, guys, is he okay?”

“W-We found him l-like this,” Bill explained, gently trying to push Richie’s hands away, “Richie, he swallowed a lot of water, he was almost face-down in the canal.”

Richie hardly heard him, clamping onto Eddie’s limp body more insistently, hovering over him as his glasses threatened to fall off his nose, “*Eds!*” he yelled, tugging at the chest of his shirt, “C’mon, Eds, wake up, Eds, wake up!”

“*Richie!*” Bill barked suddenly, startling him and the rest of the Losers. Even Bill looked taken aback, but he maintained his steely resolve as he ordered, “G-G-Give him some space!”

Richie was about to argue back when he felt Ben yank him up and away with a surprisingly strong grip on the back of his shirt.

“What the fuck, man?” he snarled, his outstretched hands smacked

away as he was thrown upright.

“I know you’re upset, Richie, but you need to calm down! They’re trying to *help* Eddie!” Beverly said, voice wavering in all its ferocity.

On the ground, Bill was furiously beating Eddie’s chest, barely keeping count of the compressions now as his movements grew more frantic. Richie tore his eyes away from the sight and directed them back at Beverly. Her eyes glimmered with tears and her expression told Richie they had been trying to do just that for a while. Richie’s eyes blazed, bruised fists clenching as he stepped towards Beverly.

“Calm *down?*” he repeated hotly, “Do you even *know* what I’ve been through the past few weeks?”

Above the deafening roar of blood flooding his ears, Richie could hear the loud, dull clunking sound of Bill slamming his hand down on Eddie’s chest, sobbing quietly as he stuttered, “*C-Cuh-Come on, Eddie! Come on, man!*”

Richie pointed an accusatory finger at Eddie, hand shaking as his face crumpled up, tears spilling hotly over his cheeks, “He’s practically *dead!* You told me—“

“*I know what I told you!*” she wailed, the scream echoing in the empty quarry.

“Guys—“ Bill said quietly, but Richie ignored him, blinded by anger

and frustration bleeding red through his eyes, through his ears, and mingling in his saliva like snake venom. His words bit. His words seared.

“Well, I guess you were wrong, Bevvie, because guess what? He’s *dead!*”

“G-G-Guys!” Bill shouted over them, rousing the attention of the Losers.

“H-He’s, he’s—“

Eddie took a big gasping breath, eyes flying open as he attempted to sit up, hands clambering to grip on something, which were quickly pinned down by Bill.

“*Eddie,*” Richie breathed, running over to him and falling to his knees.

The rough gravel ripped through the faded knees of his jeans like a knife, slicing the skin underneath in red, shallow lines. Richie ignored the bloom of heat and gripped onto Eddie’s shoulders, staring down at his wide-eyed face. His head rested in Bill’s lap, and he blinked blearily up at Richie, dirt streaking the side of his face, blood dripping steadily from his lower lip, where the skin was cracked and peeling.

His skin was clammy and fucking filthy, his clothes were half

drowned in canal water, and he honestly looked like death.

But there, in that moment, and as he would always remember it years down the line, he had never recalled seeing anything more beautiful.

“Eds,” he said hoarsely, hand coming up to cradle the side of his neck, under which a warm pulse was throbbing against Richie’s palm. His eyes nearly fluttered shut at the comforting, familiar rhythm. Unconsciously, Richie felt his own heart slow down to match it. He had Eddie in his arms.

*Everything was going to be okay.*

He looked to see where his hand had snuck up the side of his cheek, thumb stroking over his jawline in a subconscious act he might have the gall to feel ashamed about later. But in that moment, all he could feel was relief, and the euphoric recognition that *Eddie is here. Eddie is alive. Eddie is in my arms.*

He thought back to the first time he had touched him like this—that day in the Neibolt house, that fateful summer.

Pennywise had clambered towards them, razor sharp claws protruding from the fleshy talons that made up his pale hands. Saliva dripping animalistically from his maw, puddling on the broken floorboards of the dilapidated house. Eyes trained directly on Eddie, looking as if he was going to sink those rotted teeth straight into his warm, pulsing heart. Richie ran in front of the very injured, screaming Eddie. He had cupped his face, feeling the hot breath of It fanning over the back of his neck, but he hadn’t cared. All he could think was, *Eddie is hurt, Eddie is scared, and Eddie is going to die.*

*“Eddie! Look at me, Eddie!”* he had yelled, grasping his face between his hands.

Richie tried to block out that memory entirely— some things were too horrific to try to remember. And in the process of lugging that baggage back up to the surface, you were bound to knock over something solid, fracturing that fragile sense of reality you kept in a glass jar, locked away in the deepest part of your mind.

But he remembered the fear— the awful, paralyzing fear on Eddie’s face, mouth agape with silent horror, eyes screaming a mute plea as he clambered to hold onto Richie.

From where it hovered above Eddie, Richie’s face bore the same terror as Eddie’s had that day. He felt something roll off his chest— a boulder he hadn’t even been fully aware he had carrying, and from underneath that weight resurfaced a kind of dizzying fondness that scared Richie more than anything. He looked down at Eddie’s bruised, bloodied face, so weak and yet so fucking *strong*. He remembered how cold, how callous the world had been without him those past few weeks. He remembered that splintering *ache* — that pain in his heart that was beginning to slowly ebb away as he held him in his arms.

Eddie’s brown eyes glimmered in their sockets, and in that moment, all Richie could see was the boy he had been in love with since before he could even comprehend what love *was*.

Richie leaned in closer, heart threatening to burst out of his chest as he gazed down at Eddie’s face, more terrified now than he had ever

been in his life. His gaze flicked down to Eddie's lips. Eddie looked up at him, looking thoughtful, and not protesting to the way Richie's breath was now fanning over his face. He steadied an arm against the ground and—

Eddie shot up, panicked, looking Richie directly in the eye, "I'm going to hurl," he stated, before keeling over to Bill's right and spitting up a murky conglomeration of mucus and canal water.

The rest of the Losers recoiled, but Richie just smiled fondly at Eddie, smacking him on the back as his lip wobbled, chasing away droplets of water from his chin as he wiped a sleeve over his mouth.

"Aw, Eds. You look cute even when you hurl," Richie said in that teasing way that was so familiar to the both of them.

And when Eddie groaned, rolling his eyes, the ghost of an exasperated smile playing over his lips, Richie knew it for sure:

*Everything was going to be okay.*

He pinched Eddie's cheek affectionately, crowing a light-hearted, "Cute, cute, *cute!*"

Eddie just shook his head, looking as vindictive as he could through his heavy-lidded eyes, body slumping over with sleep.



Richie couldn't help it— he gathered Eddie in a bone-crushing hug, and felt his heart sear in his chest as Eddie swung his arms around him, leaning pliantly into his touch like a rag-doll. Whether he was just plain exhausted or craved the overwhelming closeness Richie did, he didn't know. But he couldn't bring himself to care as he buried his face in his neck.

He twitched, and then planted a wet, smacking kiss against his grimy cheek, grinning from ear to ear.

“That is so unsanitary, Trashmouth ,” Eddie mumbled.

And then he passed out.

## 19. Chapter Nineteen

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hi guys! Sorry for the longer wait on the recent chapters- since it's a big turning point in the story and my point of view opportunities have narrowed considerably given the chain of events, it takes a bit more planning to make effective chapters. Plus I'm a student and high school is kicking my ass big time, so kudos to that.

I want the post-reunion scenes to be perfect because of the huge build up, so I'm being more thoughtful when writing the chapters currently. What are some scenes you'd like to see between recently reunited Richie and Eddie? Suggest your ideas (NSFW or SFW) in the comments and who know- it might just make it into the story. ;)

Enjoy this next chapter!

*[About twelve feet underground the shattered roads of Derry sat Stanley Uris. He was pallid and weak, far too weak to pull himself out of the blood-stained bath. He waited in bated breath. He wouldn't be waiting for long]*

Eddie sat slumped in the backseat, head lolling back against Richie's shoulder. Faint, wispy breaths puffed out of his nose and a small opening of his mouth occasionally. His shirt soaked a red stain onto the fabric of the seat, where an old wound was still reeling. His palms were cracked and caked with dirt, thin red slash marks grazing his palm in a way that looked as though it would sting- raw and singed into the pale expanse of white. His lips were dry, peeling at the skin, looking severely dehydrated, like a man crawling through the desert for weeks in search of water. His glassy eyes were pulled shut by his heavy lids.

Richie hadn't taken his eyes off of him for a second since they pulled his body from the canal.

It was a task that should have been easy— Eddie, though grown up now, was still rather small and seven people were more than enough to lift him. The problem, however, wasn't that there weren't enough hands to help, but that Richie was dead-set on his being the *only* ones that came near Eddie.

"G-G-Guys! He's lost consciousness again. That's not good!" Bill insisted, watching as Eddie went limp in his lap.

Beverly watched the shallow movement of his chest, "I think he's going to be alright," she said, "but we need to get to a hospital. Now ."

Mike fumbled with his keys, the metal ring clinking against his palm as he brandished it, nodding towards his car.

"We need to lift him," Bill instructed, and the Losers quickly moved to place their hands under his shins, around his shoulders, and under his knees.

"Wait!" Richie protested, lifting him up by his arms and hauling his lower torso into his lap. His chin rested atop Eddie's head and he held him close, like how a child might clutch a teddy bear after a nightmare, "Let me carry him."

Bill shook his head, hands coming to rest on Eddie's flank as he went to take him back, "Nu-uh. You're in almost as bad shape as he is, Richie. Let us do it."

His nostrils flared, grimacing a kind of self-entitled snarl, feeling Eddie's soft hair tickle his pulse point. He tried not to lean in.

"I'm fine! Just— let me do this!"

Richie didn't wait for further confirmation before wobbling upright, holding Eddie in a paltry, clumsy version of a bridal carry. Sweat crested at his forehead, arms clearly strained from his exertion. Eddie was by no means heavy, but Richie was by no means in the proper condition to be holding anything upright. Even his head lolled, body drooping at the weight of the night.

"Richie," Bill said softly, placing a hand on his shoulder. His eyes were gentle, and Richie melted, remembering the man in front of them as the leader that had saved their lives dozens of times, "d-d-do you trust me?"

Yes , Richie thought quietly.

He gave in, too tired to put up a fight, muscles pleading for a respite, if only for a brief moment. His gaze softened, and he let Bill gently take him from his arms, Eddie's cheek plastered against his shirt. Bill nodded, patting Richie on the back. He kept his eyes glued to Eddie the entire walk to Mike's car. Softly, Beverly took his hand, thumb

brushing over his knuckles, squeezing his palm comfortingly: *a truce*.

The car came into view— after all, the Losers had hastily parked it just above the canal as they raced down the Kenduskeag, so it wasn't far at all. By the way Richie's knees were buckling, he couldn't help but feel silently grateful for that fact. As he looked at the pale moonlight glinting off the silver exterior of Mike's car, Richie felt himself slipping into a memory again. With each exhausted loll of his head and every passing second he spent in Derry, it felt like he was sinking further and further into his past.

Some memories were best left forgotten. Fortunately, this one was kind.

*When Bill had first gotten his license the summer of 1992, it very quickly became the unofficially designated hangout spot. Much like the clubhouse, the Barrens, or the Quarry had, Bill's dad's beat up sedan had taken on a kind of uncanny importance in the budding adolescence of the Losers.*

The car not only courted them, but the last remaining dredges of their childhood as they grew older, and subsequently, apart. That car had seen some of the last conversations between the Losers, and witnessed the closing of that powerful circle that connected them all and would never be whole again. It had courted them to the tail-end of their childhood like a white knight, from the blue to the black, the unknown to the *solitary* unknown. And that in itself made it a truly powerful thing indeed.

But it hadn't always seemed like a bittersweet omen.

Richie distinctly remembered barrelling down that same path as the

one he trudged along now, listless energy spilling over like a sparking livewire as his limbs barely stood to contain the twitchy restlessness that plagued Richie's body like a disease.

*"Shotgun!"* he yelled into the blue sky, head tilted back in a kind of gleeful worship. His glasses knocked against his nose. He grinned.

"No fair!" Eddie huffed, slinking into the backseat, right behind Bill, *"You always call shotgun, Richie."*

"Sorry, Eds my boy," he had replied, putting his feet up on the dash before Bill promptly pushed them down, "don't hate the player, hate the game."

"I just hate *you*," Eddie had responded.

"You can't do that, Eds. Have you even been listening to a single word I said?"

"Sometimes, Richie, I wish that I didn't," he sighed, tone petulant and bitchy.

And Richie just smiled, popping an *AC/DC* cassette into the player. When the car started rolling, he glanced back at Eddie, who had met his gaze, sticking out his tongue. Richie laughed and reclined back in his seat with his heart a warm weight in his chest.

*He remembered that, he had always called, he had always called—*

—Shotgun?” he heard Bill chuckle, looking pointedly at him as the stood at the front of the car.

“Huh?” Richie said intelligently.

“I said,” Bill smiled, stutter vanquished from his voice like a sour relative at a family reunion, “aren’t you going to call shotgun?”

*His eyes were curious, imploring, almost as if prodding him to ask, do you remember, Richie? Do you remember how easy it had been? Flying down those crackled roads of Derry like the Devil was out to beat us and laughing like it didn’t really matter? Do you? Do you?*

*Richie nodded to himself, I do, Big Bill, I remember, I remember things I wish I wasn’t remembering and oh God, Big Bill, my heart is a gaping wound in my chest right now. Funny how the world works out, huh? You always knew what to do, Big Bill, but I think I’m alone in this one, I really think I do.*

“I’ll sit in the back with Eds,” he said finally, though it had only come a beat after Bill had asked, and rather quickly to the rest of the Losers.

But Richie’s world was moving like legs against the tide, heavy and dragging and getting nowhere fast. The world was lolling along like a lazy wave, a slow drip IV into his veins, into his system as he watched it with bleary eyes. He was a testament to time, a Polaroid

perfectly capturing his past and where he stood now, in the crosshairs of it all. Richie was a man of everything and nothing, all at once.

Bill laid him across Richie's lap, waiting for Richie to buckle up before letting Eddie lay slumped against his chest, handing him over as if he were something fragile.

Richie took one look at Eddie's doped-out face, *you are everything*, he thought in a breathless sort of realization.

It didn't come with a bang, and the world didn't even so much as tremble beneath his feet as the words passed through his mind like a wandering pedestrian. It was no grand revelation complete with blaring sirens and chiming bells like Richie had always thought it would. It just came and then it was gone, almost lost in that slow cosmos of thunder and the stronger, overriding thought:

*I want my Eddie and I want to be out of here.*

Mike glanced at him in the rearview mirror, eyes probing Richie for some kind of quiet reassurance. For the go-ahead. Beside him sat Bill, Ben having taken his own car, and Beverly nestled on the other side of Eddie, succumbing to the seductive brush of sleep. Richie nodded curtly, feeling his own exhaustion weigh heavily on him, but not daring to shut his eyes even for a moment, in fear that he would open them to an Eddie-less world, once again.

Mike turned the key in the ignition and pulled out of the parking lot, taking to the night in a sleepy lull as they drove towards the blinding whiteness of the emergency room. In his lap, Eddie twitched, and all Richie could think was:



*Please, God, let this night end okay.*

The stars provided no answers, nor did the breeze as it ruffled his hair, whispering into his ears. He leaned his head atop of Eddie's and let himself rest for the first time in weeks.

## 20. Chapter Twenty

### Notes for the Chapter:

Happy (Canadian) Thanksgiving everyone! I am overwhelmed with the amount of love and support I've received for this fic and just wanted to take a moment to sincerely thank each and every one of you for taking the time to read, love, and cherish my work. I see each and every kind comment you leave and it fills my heart with endless amounts of joy and gratitude, and for that, I cannot thank you enough.

I hope this almost four-thousand word chapter serves as a token of appreciation for you all, and stay tuned, because this story is just beginning.

The next few hours went by in a blur of blinding white, firm hands, and the irrefutable drag of the night. They had hardly so much as stepped through those heavy double-doors before Eddie was being whisked away on a stretcher, practically pried from Bill's strong arms, where he passionately bled out onto his shirt. He was barely clinging to consciousness, head lolling back, eyes fluttering occasionally as he mumbled nonsensical bits of phrases.

*Like he was having a conversation with himself,* Richie recalled with a shudder.

Nurses had manhandled him away, their grip seeming to burn purple-red bruises onto his pallid skin, strapping him tightly into that cot as they wheeled him down the endless spans of linoleum hallways that twisted and winded in serpentine paths, each one more hopeless. He outwardly convulsed as Eddie was taken into a room, the door slammed shut behind him, disappearing from view. He remembered feeling faint, the soft edges of the world melting through his eyes, where sharp daggers of exhaustion staked themselves through,

punishing that pale vampirism that tugged at his legs and settled in the black pools growing beneath his sunken eyes.

He distantly recalled a strong hand gripping his forearm, tethering him to whatever aimless floe of reality swum in his crowded mind. Bill— he thought, he felt it in that sure touch. That silent strength. The firm, *“You’re alright, Trashmouth. Take a seat.”*

Then someone had perched in front of him, crouching on that scuffed white tile floor, peering softly up at him. A hand on his knee, warm and gentle. He caught sight of a dainty wedding ring winking in the dim light of the hospital, and drew his bleary eyes up to see Beverly.

“He’s going to be okay, Richie, alright?”

He tried to nod. He wasn’t sure if he did, head heavy as rocks on his aching neck, feeling both painfully within himself and impossibly away. The world swam around him, but didn’t mingle with the rapids coursing through his mind. He let his focus shift to her face for a moment. Her eyes were buried under a light bruising of exhaustion like the rest of the Losers, and a thin coating of smudged mascara. Her lips were drawn into a small smile— tired, but so genuine. Her auburn hair fell softly around her face, slightly mussed from where she had raked her fingers through it moments before.

He reached for her hand, splaying it over the one resting on the knee of his jeans, and she sat there with him a moment before gently rising to her feet, pressing a soft kiss against his forehead and joining Ben in the row of chairs adjacent to where Richie sat. Mike was fiddling with his golden sheriff’s badge, looking quietly pensive as he waited for Bill to return, who was somewhere in the winding corridors talking to his publisher in a hushed, tense tones over the phone.

The underlying medicinal smell of the hospital mingled languidly in Richie's nostrils as he took in a mindless sharp inhale through his nose. The night staff looked bored, the secretary's face illuminated by the soft glow of the computer. Through her gold-rimmed glasses, Richie thought he could see the dim reflection of Solitaire playing across the screen. All was stiflingly silent, except for the low, sticky click of computer keys and the occasional sound of shoe soles rubbing against the polished floors as nurses made their nightly rounds, peering into rooms and doing various odd-jobs that would turn the stomachs of any ordinary pedestrian.

Richie's stomach lurched pointedly when he thought about what they must be doing to Eddie— poking and prodding at those weeping wounds. Blood— there had been so much *blood*.

He remembered how it had caked his palms, staining them an ugly faded pink as it crusted over his skin and dug itself under his fingernails, settling around his cuticles. It had taken a full week to wash out, and idly, when Richie looked down, he sometimes felt as though he could still see that endless sea of red washing over him like a suffocating tide.

*He couldn't have been bleeding out that entire time in the sewers* , Richie thought distantly, he would have been utterly drained. So the bleeding must have stopped at one point then, which left the unnerving question:

*Why did the wounds start bleeding freshly once he staggered back into the open arms of Derry? Why was he even alive at all?*

Richie was no Stan by any means; while he, like everyone else, had a

relatively firm set of beliefs when it came to reality and its limitations, had always been rather complacent in accepting the trivial discrepancies of it all. That had only seemed to intensify after the first battle with It, and there it lingered like mildew on a window. Some people, like Stan or Ben spent half their lives trying to fit life's incongruities into their perceived reality. Tried to bend and shape it to abide by the laws they had created; what was possible and what was not.

Richie never felt so compelled to do so. They had stared into the cold, dead eyes of It, faced the rotting, horrible stink in the dark that most people wouldn't even dream of. This was something that couldn't be reasoned away.

Stan had tried to, at least. But look where that ended him.

Richie took in a sharp breath, clumsily rising to his feet and dizzily clambering towards the heavy metal doors of the hospital. He needed a fucking smoke.

He navigated past the sleeping forms of Beverly, Ben and Mike, stepping out into that cool night air and settling himself down on a curb a few feet away, nearly folding up under the sheer amount of effort it took to pull himself to the ground.

His body screamed for sleep. His mind churned on, uncaring.

Being in that hospital for Eddie, Richie remarked to himself, must feel just as well as if he were coming back home. He had spent most of his childhood here after all, getting loaded up with a cocktail of

drugs and his own mother's overbearing, suffocating imitation of love. He remembered the day Eddie had broken his arm that day in the Neibolt house. He'd never forget the silent scream that had ripped its way through his weak lungs as he lay in a heap of collapsed wood and plaster, arm sticking out sorely in a sickeningly unnatural angle.

He'd never forget the raw fear in Eddie's eyes that day, the way it had done nothing to lessen even as Richie held him in his arms. They had faced It by themselves long before that, but that moment was the first time Richie could remember feeling completely and utterly helpless.

He remembered yelling hazily to Eddie that he was going to snap the bone back into place, fingers trembling where they ghosted over his forearm. He remembered Eddie staring horrified into his eyes, such raw conviction in them as his lips curled into an indignant snarl.

*"Do not fucking touch me!"*

He remembered hearing similar words from Pennywise, *don't touch the other boys, Richie, or they'll know your secret.*

And maybe that's what compelled him to yank his arm as hard as he could that day, popping the bone into place with a sickening crunch.

He'd never forget the way Eddie was whisked away by his mother, tears sopping through his skin as he was roughly escorted into the passenger seat, eyes the picture of shattered, face the portrait of horror. How Richie had reached out for him, and the way Eddie just turned away, watching the horizon through a blur of tears as his

mom drove him away. He remembered the fight that had ensued between the Losers directly after. He remembered the sting of Bill's punch, the grate of his words.

*"Eddie almost died!"* he remembered yelling, brows creasing an angry narrative across his face, fists lunging towards Bill.

He remembered storming off, hot, angry tears coursing paths down his dirt-streaked cheeks. He remembered wheeling his bike beside him as he numbly walked to his house, storming past the cool presence of those distant parents, throwing himself under the assault of the shower, sobbing into the streams of water until he was wrung of any palpable emotion apart from shame.

Shame— it never seemed to run out. It lingered, festered, mutated in the pit of your stomach like acid, crawling up your throat in the form of unsaid confessions and angry outbursts that spewed out like bile.

Shame, you never truly out-run it. Just assign it different names, different faces. Push it deeper into the dark crevices of your heart where it withers and rots like a weed. But at the end of the day, when the sun goes down and you crawl into those cool, empty sheets, it waits for you, wraps its frigid arms around you like a second skin and seduces you with memories you wish you could forget, people you wish you hadn't loved.

Richie knew shame all too well.

*But that's not where the memory ends*, a little voice in his head nagged as he breathed out into the cool air, *because that wasn't the last time*

*you saw Eddie Kaspbrak in those two weeks. You hadn't stayed away, remember, Richie? Remember?*

"Of course I remember," he spat out, wrapping his arms tightly around him, squeezing around his torso like a constrictor.

It had been three days after Eddie was admitted into the hospital, far longer than necessary for something as minor as a broken arm, but Mrs. Kaspbrak was devout in her ministrations. She prayed through every pill she fed him and gave sermons through every ' *don't do that Eddie.*'

Mrs. Kaspbrak was the red-faced, heavy-handed voice of God in Eddie's life, and maybe that thought was what had pushed Richie past the doors of his house that day and to the outskirts of Derry General Hospital.

It was coming to him clearer now, like the image shifting into focus at the eye doctors.

*Is this one clearer Richie? Can you see it now? One or two, Richie, can you see?*

Yes, Richie thought, *I can see, I remember how—*

*Richie had thrown rocks at the window that summer day. He thanked God that Eddie had been given a floor-level room, but expected nothing less from Mrs. Kaspbrak, who was certain a spontaneous fire might break out at any given moment, trapping her and her son in its scalding embrace of*



*death.*

After the third dull ‘ *clunk* ,’ Eddie had tentatively slid the window open. Clumsily at that, his cast an unforgiving and awkward weight on his arm.

Richie dropped the fourth stone he had gathered with a dull ‘thud’, grinning widely as he sauntered towards the window, peering at Eddie’s pinched looking face behind his thick glasses as he gazed scrutinizingly at him.

“What the fuck are you doing here? ” he whispered harshly, nervously glancing at the door beside him, as if expecting his mother to barge through any minute now and yank him back inside.

“Well, hello to you to, Eds. Parting is such sweet sorrow, etcetera, etcetera,” Richie yapped, but his resolve faltered slightly at the displeased look on Eddie’s face. He briefly wondered if he made a mistake coming here.

“Beep beep, Richie,” Eddie sighed, rubbing his good hand over his face like an over-tired child, which was exactly what he was.

“Mrs. K in there?”

“Do you think you’d be alive right now if she was?” Eddie shot back.

“Good point, Eds. Pretty chuckalicious if you ask me. Hey, did that fall in the Neibolt house knock your funny-bone into place?”

Eddie breathed out an unbelieving wisp of a laugh before moving to close the window, “ *Goodbye* , Richie.”

“Wait,” Richie interjected a bit desperately, “let me in, please?”

“What?” Eddie said, looking as if Richie had just suggested they join a travelling circus.

“I just want to talk.”

Eddie worried at his bottom lip, casting another nervous glance at the door before reluctantly sliding the window completely ajar, looking back at Richie with narrowed eyes, “Fine. But if my mom catches you —“

Richie, already sliding in with a shit-eating grin landed on the white floors with a triumphant sound, “Don’t you worry your cute little head, Spaghetti, Mrs. K has a real soft spot for me.”

“That’s not what she said to me,” Eddie grumbled, crossing his arms firmly over his chest, wincing as he disturbed his fracture.

“Well, you should have heard her last night. It was all, ‘*Oh, Richie! Don’t stop! Oh—*“

*“Richie!”* Eddie squeaked condemningly, throwing his good hand over his mouth.

Richie licked his palm, instantly causing Eddie to recoil, wiping it on his shirt with a horrified look, giving Richie’s infamous Trashmouth a platform to quip, and quip it did.

“That’s right, Eds. Now you’re getting it!”

Eddie settled down beside him on the bed with a terse little pout, “You know, you really are a turd sometimes, Richie,” he looked sideways at him before adding, “and don’t call me Eds.”

“I know,” he sighed, ignoring that last part, “Big Bill’s giving me a real run for my money, I’ll tell you that, Eds. Bastard decked me, can you believe it?”

“He punched you?” Eddie said suddenly, good hand coming up to softly touch the faint bruising under Richie’s eye, “Oh my God, he did.”

Richie tried not to notice the way his heart threatened to beat out of his chest or the way a furious blush bloomed beneath his cheek as Eddie’s fingers grazed gently under his eye.

Richie did what he did best: deflect.

“Yeah, gave me the ol’ one two. Woulda punched back but I had a date with your mom to get to.”

Eddie pulled his hand away, rolling his eyes, and Richie could breathe again, ignoring the way the touch ghosted over his skin and the empty feeling gnawing at the pit of his stomach where butterflies once swam.

“You’re impossible.”

“I know,” Richie said, letting his eyes wander. They lit up immediately as he spotted a bright red Sharpie on the small corner table. He hoisted himself off the cot before returning with a wide grin, uncapping it with the zeal of a madman.

“What are you doing with that?” Eddie frowned.

“Signing your cast, of course!” he crowed, making grabby hands for Eddie’s wounded arm, which he held away from him defensively.

“No way! My mom will notice if you sign your name, and then she’ll know you were here!”

“I guess I just won’t sign my name then, huh, Eds?” he grinned, and reluctantly, Eddie held out his arm, “If you draw a dick, Richie, I swear—“

Richie opened his mouth to quip back, but the joke died in his throat as he caught sight of the crudely scrawled ‘ *Loser* ’ obstructing the cast.

“Oh yeah, Greta Bowie had a good laugh over that one,” Eddie sighed, “my mom had a bird.”

Richie felt his heart drop, a searing, dead weight at his feet. Eddie held a nonchalant air about him, but his eyes revealed the quiet kind of misery he felt inside. Richie’s stomach lurched, he wanted to tell Eddie that he wasn’t a loser, not to him, but he couldn’t find the words through a tumble of emotions flooding his veins.

“How’d she even do that?” Richie said, gesturing vaguely, “I thought Mrs. K had you cooped up in here all week.”

“Nah,” Eddie said, “she couldn’t convince the doctors to let me stay more than a night for a broken bone. I’m just here for a routine check-up, which is why you should go—“

Richie ignored the gentle push his friend administered to his arm, and the flighty gaze that had seemed to come over him. Eddie was very obviously just as uncomfortable about the mention of Greta’s cruel trick as he was about the prospect of his mother walking in.

“Hold on,” he insisted, taking Eddie’s arm into his lap, where he began to scratch a clumsy ‘V’ over the protruding black ‘S.’

Eddie watched him like the hawks Stan so loved to watch in the park.

“‘Lover?’” he asked, looking mildly amused as he inspected Richie’s handiwork.

“*I’m a lover, not a fighter,*” Richie began to croon off-key, laughing as Eddie started to push him towards the open window.

*He could still be heard chuckling to himself as he rolled onto the grass below, and as Richie turned his head to take one more look at Eddie, he could have sworn he saw him smile.*

As Richie came out of the memory, his need for a smoke grew violent. He grumbled, nursing a too-dry cigarette in the crook of his mouth as he waged war with a lighter that wouldn’t light.

“Fuck,” he muttered, hardly hearing the sound of footfalls as they approached him.

“Need a light?” a voice asked.

Richie chuckled drily, making room for Beverly to sit down beside him. True to her word, she produced a small packet of matches from her pocket, striking one and pressing the smoldering end to the butt of the drag.

“Thanks,” Richie slurred around the cigarette and the overpowering need for sleep.

“Don’t think it was out of the goodness of my heart, Trashmouth,” she said, plucking it from his mouth and taking a long drag herself.

It stilled between her two fingers, a thin wisp of smoke twisting up towards the night sky, and they exchanged a glance before falling into soft, easy laughter.

Richie smiled, despite himself, “How would ol’ Haystack feel about you smoking up with the Trashmouth at this hour?”

She bumped his shoulder, handing him back the cigarette, shivering in the slight breeze as the smoke started to relax her tightly-wound body.

“I quit,” she stated, looking at him, “but I’ve had a hell of a night, I think I deserve this.”

Richie chuckled softly to himself, pursing his lips as he inhaled a lungful of the bitter air, “Yeah, you’re right about that.”

A still, comfortable silence came over them, and they watched the stars in a motionless gaze for a few minutes. But then again, Richie had never been able to be quiet for long.

"I never used to smoke, you know," Richie said, and he wondered why it felt more like a confession than a fact.

By the way Beverly turned her head to gaze at his face, the observance was clearly mutual.

Richie pushed on, *no backing out of it now, I suppose.*

"Never liked the taste," he tried, pausing. "Only ever did it to piss off Eds."

Beverly looked at him curiously, and he watched the dark line of trees over the highway, ignoring her imploring gaze on the side of his face, continuing.

"God, it used to piss him off so much. I used to think it was because of the asthma, you know? But I don't think that was it. I think, maybe," his voice quieted, almost shyly, "maybe that was Eds' way of showing he cared."

He braved a glance at Beverly, before deciding her thoughtful gaze was too much to handle right now, averting his eyes once again as he zeroed in on the weakening column of smoke twisting from the end of his neglected cigarette.

"I mean, his mom...that's how she loved him, wasn't it? Loaded him up with pills and told him all the different ways he could get hurt. It was like...by telling him all the ways he could die, it was like her



telling him she cared enough that he lived.”

If Richie had turned his head at that moment, he might have caught onto the fond, knowing look Beverly was regarding him with. But he didn't, and took her silence as rejection.

“I don't know,” he dismissed, sniffing and casting his head upwards, avoiding her gaze, “I guess I just liked doing stupid things so he would tell me not to, so....”

“So you would know he cared?” Beverly asked gently, and Richie nodded mutely, stubbing out the cigarette against the pavement with his foot.

There was so much that could be said from that sentiment, those simple words, that simple nod a confession in itself. But Beverly just placed a hand on his shoulder, Richie suspecting this only affirmed what she already suspected.

“It's fuckin' impossible to sleep in those chairs,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over his face, palm scratching the five o'clock shadow forming on his chin.

“It's impossible to sleep at all. Every time I close my eyes, it's like...” Richie looked hauntedly over the horizon, “it's like I'm watching him die over and over again.”

Beverly looked at him sympathetically, palm rubbing a soft circle

over his back, “Well, I don’t know how much I can do about the chair situation, but I think, if you wanted, we could arrange to sneak you into Eddie’s room.”

Richie looked doubtfully at her, eyebrows raised as much as his tired face would allow, “Isn’t that against hospital protocols?”

“Oh, for sure,” she said, “I’ve never known you to be stickler for rules though, Trashmouth.”

When Richie only huffed out a laugh in response, she continued, “Mike’s the sheriff, you know. He could pull some strings, just say the word.”

Richie looked sidelong at her for a moment, eyes softening slightly under her genuine gaze. She patted his back, pressing a small keycard firmly into his hand, closing his fingers around it. With another squeeze, she was gone, shoes clacking against the sidewalk as she made her way inside. After a few minutes, Richie brought himself to his feet, and if anyone noticed the way he slipped into Eddie’s room that night, they didn’t say a word.

Taking one look at Eddie’s sleeping form, nestled beneath a blanket, he pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead before slumping into the chair opposite to him, submitting to the desperate clutches of his own exhaustion and letting himself fall into a dreamless sleep.

## 21. Chapter Twenty One

*[Eddie Kaspbrak lay stiff as a board, light as a feather, nestled under the scratchy industrial sheets of Derry General Hospital. A fluffier, well-loved blue blanket brushes against his cheek softly. In his sleep, he hums approvingly, leaning in closer. A few feet away, Richie sat slumped into a paltry imitation of a loveseat, fraying fabric drooping towards the white linoleum floor. The rest of the Losers were out getting coffee, and would join the two in the room soon enough, but for that moment, they were alone in their silence.]*

*Beep, beep, beep.*

The machine hooked up to Eddie's arm trilled, indicating the bag attached to his IV was due to be changed. He frowned in his sleep, wincing as he disturbed the tight bandaging wrapped around his torso.

*Beep, beep, beep—*

*—Beep, Richie!"*

The year was 1989, the Losers sprawled across the carpet of Richie's room like ragdolls, empty candy wrappers littering the floor, only half of them originating from that night.

"Fucking disgusting," Eddie said just a moment ago, nose scrunching up as he followed in a chastening tone, "I wouldn't be surprised if there were ants in here."

“The only aunt in here was yours last week, Eds,” Richie had replied with a certain kind of effortless nonchalance patented by the Great Trashmouth Tozier.

“That’s fucking disgusting,” Eddie hissed, glaring daggers at him from where he sat on the carpet, amidst a particularly impressive hoard of candy wrappers, “they’re attracted to sticky things you know, ants.”

Richie’s eyes went wide behind his stupid coke-bottle glasses, looking like a mime reject working for spare change, “Oh shit, you don’t think they got to the *Playboy* magazines under my bed then, right?”

It took Eddie a moment to get the innuendo, but as soon as he did he was jumping to his feet, tackling Richie to the floor.

The rest of the Losers failed to stifle laughter, Stan muttering, “*Oh my God*,” as Eddie clumsily reached for Richie’s arms, trying and failing to pin them to the ground, half-straddling him with a leg swung haphazardly over his lap. He didn’t really know what his aim was, only that Richie didn’t know how to shut his fucking mouth and Eddie needed to do something about it. He half-heartedly threw closed fists at his shoulder, frowning as he kicked uselessly at his legs.

“*Beep beep*, Richie!”

Richie grabbed his arms, pinning them above his head, locking eyes with Eddie for one pulse-stuttering moment. Eddie could have sworn

his dark playful eyes had him in a trance, their faces inches apart as he beamed down at him like the sun, each individual freckle across his face visible as he practically breathed into Eddie's mouth.

And then he planted a disgusting, wet raspberry right at the side of his neck, Richie's glasses careening off his face as Eddie kicked him off, flushing bright red and clutching his now-damp cheek.

"You are so gonna pay for that, Tozier!"

Richie, clearly feeling brave, laughed wholeheartedly and did weird 'woogity woogity' hand gestures, "Oh, I'm so scared! Little Eds is gonna get a stepstool and fight me like a man! I can hardly believe my eyes!"

Eddie's face twisted into an expression of sheer indignant rage seemingly reserved for Richie, "I'll have you know I'm exactly the expected height for my age, asshole! You're just giant!"

Richie, who was verging on the bend of six feet at only fourteen, only laughed, wiggling his eyebrows before saying, "You wanna know what else is giant—"

"FINISH THAT SENTENCE, I DARE YOU!" Eddie yelled, rounding on Richie, who jumped on the bed and cowered behind Stan, using him as a sort of human shield.

"Protect me, Stan! He's gonna kill me!" Richie howled, hands

roaming over Stan's chest, face buried in the back of his shirt.

Stan just rolled his eyes, pushing him off and tumbling across the bed, "Good, then maybe we could finally get some fucking peace and quiet around here for once."

Richie gasped, the sound choked and cut-off as Eddie straddled him, digging his fingers into his ribs,.

"Was that a swear word, Staniel? How would your mother feel, boy? Ah, ah say, your mother will be heartbroken, boyo!"

Stan just rolled his eyes, sending Mike his patented, '*can you believe this shit?*' look, which Mike returned with a soft smile and a shake of his head.

"Mercy, mercy!" Richie pleaded as Eddie mercilessly tickled him, kicking his legs clumsily as he slunk further off the bed.

Eddie just slapped his arm, frowning disapprovingly. But he let up, collapsing on top of Richie's chest, who looked at him curiously, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Shut up, dickwad," he warned, hovering his hands threatening over his exposed stomach.

He opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment, Beverly

walked in with her hair in hot rollers, a magazine in hand. Bill was close in tow, and the Losers realized with unbelieving laughter that he too, was wearing rollers, and eyeshadow by the looks of it.

“The f-fuh-fuck did I m-muh-miss?” he frowned.

And then they dissolved into laughter. Eddie would never forget the way Richie’s chest heaved under him, or the way he looked as his eyes sparkled up at Eddie’s, that shit-eating grin plastered across his face. He would never have admitted that, of course, especially not the day after The Great Sleepover of 1989, when Richie had drawn a moustache across his face with permanent marker while he slept.

“ *Shhh* ,” he remembered Richie hissing as he stirred in his sleep, “*guys, be quiet, I think he’s—*

*—waking up.*”

Eddie mumbled, blinking heavily as he chased the last remnants of his dream away, groaning at the bright light beaming down at him.

His eyes glared blearily at his surroundings, squinting at the various figures circled around the room. He made out the serene face of Mike, Beverly’s sparkling grin, and then zeroed in on the stupid, stupid face of Richie ‘Trashmouth’ Tozier.

“Morning, Sleeping Beauty ,” he snickered, as if reading Eddie’s mind.

Eddie groaned, throwing his good arm over his face, opening one eye and staring accusatorially at Richie, “Fuck off, Trashmouth.”

Richie looked undeterred. In fact, he looked almost egged on as he grinned at him, wiggling his eyebrows as he shoved his hand into his pocket, rocking on his feet with the same kind of nervous energy Eddie and grown to tolerate— and, God help him, *love*, over the years.

“Still not a morning person, huh, Eds?”

“No,” he spat back, drifting back to the memory he had just been reacquainted with, “because *someone* liked to do weird shit to me while I slept. I’d be surprised if I didn’t have a dick drawn across my forehead right now.”

Richie stared at him fondly, and he stepped forward, looking as though he was going to say something important. Eddie’s heart twitched in his chest, and he watched with wide eyes as Richie kneeled beside his bed.

“I would never do that, Eds,” he said softly, “not when you’re so vulnerable and weak.”

He took Eddie’s hand, and Eddie knew, he just knew with a furious kind of introspection that his face was flaming with a kind of stubborn feverish heat he couldn’t even blame on the gaping wound in his side.



He stroked a thumb over his wrist, looking deep into his eyes, “I didn’t draw a dick on your forehead, Eds,” he leaned in closer, “I drew your mom’s vagina.”

Eddie pushed him away, face scrunching up in a way that sent a dull ache through his still-healing cheek, the Losers’ laughter echoing through the room. Richie’s, he noted, as always, was the loudest. He tried not to stare as Richie grinned up at him from the floor, eyes twinkling behind those stupid glasses of his. He almost didn’t notice the nurse walk in, cocking an eyebrow at him and then Richie, and then the rest of the Losers in turn before settling her gaze at Mike.

“I thought I told you one visitor at a time only, Mr. Hanlon.”

“Oh, there is no way that’s hospital policy,” Richie rolled his eyes, “Eddie spent practically half his childhood in here and I’m sure his mom counts as at *least* two people.”

“Shut *up*, ” Eddie hissed at him, Richie winking in return.

The nurse looked curiously between the two of them and the exchange, before Mike drew her attention back, clearing her throat, “Actually, we were just heading out.”

“Mhm,” she said, shooting him a skeptical glance, “and is Buddy Holly staying here with Mr. Kaspbrak or did he wander in off the streets?”

“Buddy Holly isn’t going anywhere, thank you very much,” Richie scoffed, frowning at a snickering Eddie before lolling his head back to look at the nurse, who was stepping over him, “you should stay for the show. I hear it’ll be a riot. Everybody loves *Richie Tozier’s All Dead Rockshow!*”

The nurse glanced at his theatrical hand gestures, unimpressed, “It’ll be a hard pass from me, I’m just here to change Eddie’s IV bags so he doesn’t go rogue on us,” she glanced at Eddie, and then back at Richie, “but it seems like your friend here is just begging to hear it.”

“Real funny,” Eddie frowned, glaring past the nurse and directly into Richie’s lenses, “forcing me to listen to your bullshit as I lay here, *dying*.”

“Oh, you’re not going to *die*,” she said chipperly, hooking the IV back into his arm in one fluid motion, securing a fresh bandage over it and stepping towards the door.

“Lucky me,” Eddie grumbled.

But by the way Richie beamed up at him, he couldn’t help but feel like he really *was* the luckiest man on earth. He dismissed the thought with a burn in his cheeks, and fortunately was distracted from it when he saw Mike, Ben, Bev, and Bill turn to leave.

“You’re going?” he asked, trying to sit up, wincing at the pain in his side.

“You heard the woman,” Mike shrugged, grinning charmingly at him. His sheriff’s badge winked back, and Eddie cast a nervous glance at Richie.

“What, you’re just going to leave me here with him alone?”

“T-T-Trashmouth will go easy on you, Eddie,” Bill grinned, looking at the man crouched on the ground, “isn’t that right, Richie?”

Richie just shrugged, peering up at Eddie over his coffee cup. Wait—*coffee cup*?

“You fuckheads got *coffee* and didn’t even get some for me?” Eddie frowned.

Now that he realized this little fact, he could hardly process anything else but the overwhelming smell of dark brew, groaning lowly as he leaned back against his pillow.

“Doctor’s orders,” Mike shrugged.

“Is that all you can say now?” Eddie bitched, “I liked you better when you were talking about playing cards with some old ladies in Florida.”

Richie crowed with joy, clapping his hands together, “Nice one, Eds! Real chuckalicious if I’m being honest!”

“What, I nearly die and suddenly you start talking like you’re thirteen again?” Eddie shot back, ignoring the flutter in his heart. It was probably a side effect of being stabbed through the chest with a giant, monstrous spider claw, but it’s not like you could *Google* that shit.

“Hate to break it to you, Eddie,” Bill shrugged, “but Richie’s been speaking like he’s thirteen for the past twenty seven years.”

“Oh and you’re one to talk?” Richie scoffed, “remind me, Big Bill, who thrusts his fists against the p-p-posts again?”

“*Richie!*” Eddie and Beverly chided him in unison.

Bill just laughed, shaking his head, “I guess we didn’t call you Trashmouth for nothing.”

“All I know is that I’m gonna get out of here before he starts taking jabs at *me*,” Mike chuckled, starting for the door.

“Me too,” Ben echoed, grabbing Beverly’s hand with one of his own and twisting the doorknob with the other.

“Wait up, Ben,” Richie called, “I haven’t gotten to seduce your ass

into bed and make *sweet, sweet* love to you yet!”

“You couldn’t land me in your *dreams*, Tozier.”

“I’m goin’ back to Florida!” Mike laughed, walking through the door.

“Bring me back an alligator!” Richie hooted, “I hear they’re in season this time of year!”

The door shut closed behind them, and Richie turned to regard Eddie with a court jester’s grin.

“I don’t wanna hear a *word* from you, Buddy Holly.”

Richie beamed at him, and Eddie’s eyes went wide, shaking his head and firmly saying, “Richie, *no*.”

*“So if we ever part and I leave you, you sit and hold me and you tell me boldly that some day, well I’ll be blue,”* Richie crooned off-key, slipping into a register Eddie thought only dogs were capable of hearing.

He buried his face in his hands, peering at Richie through the gaps in his fingers and muttering, “*God*, I hate you.”

“You love me,” Richie teased.

*God help me*, Eddie thought, staring into his sparkling eyes, *I think I do*.

Instead he said, “You fucking asshole. Taunting me with your stupid coffee when you know I can’t have any.”

Richie rolled his eyes, grinning, “Well *sue me* for wanting to keep our little Eddie Spaghetti safe.”

Eddie just frowned, and Richie sighed, standing up and offering him the cup, “If you die, I’ll never forgive you.”

“I know.”

Eddie made grabby hands for the coffee, but Richie just shook his head, placing the rim of the cup against his bottom lip. He let Richie give him a small sip, moaning gratefully as he felt his nerves spark alive from the warm rush of caffeine.

“You know this is so bad for you and the nurse is totally gonna yell at me later, right?”

“I know.”

“And you know this probably has my backwash in it and you just

slurped in millions of Trashmouth germs?”

Eddie rounded on him, glaring up at his dumb face with as much anger as he could possibly muster with Richie’s face so close to his, his hand grazing his lips.

“You know I could still kick your ass and am contemplating doing that right now, right?”

Richie looked down at him fondly, a smile twitching at his lips, “I know.”

*God, I hate your dumb face and your idiotic voice and I hate the way you look at me, Richie, because it makes me feel things that hurt my heart and dizzy my mind, and you never shut up is the problem* , Eddie thought.

Instead he said, “Your hair looks like shit.”

It was true— it was matted to his forehead greasily in a way that told Eddie he hadn’t gone home to shower since last night, unlike the rest of the Losers who looked mildly less atrocious. His normally soft curls were limp and tangled in the stale air, and Eddie furiously fought back the urge to rake his fingers through it.

Richie just laughed, “Well, I’m *sorry*, Eds. Not all of us got a spongebath from the hot nurse like you did.”

Eddie flushed. He should have known he wouldn’t have been left

covered in grime, but he never stopped to think about exactly *how* he had ended up in bed squeaky clean. The thought of being naked in front of a stranger sent shivers up his spine.

“You haven’t heard the word ‘bath’ in your life, Richie,” Eddie mumbled, pulling the fabric of his nightgown closer to his chest as he made a paltry attempt to cross his arms.

“I’ve given your mother plenty of spongebaths,” Richie said, winking, “it’s not pretty work, but hell if it doesn’t pay well.”

“*Beep beep*, Richie!” Eddie interjected, glaring at him, “You’re going to set off my fucking heart monitor.”

Richie followed his eyes to the machine wheeled beside his bed, a steady green line trailing up and down the display screen. He smirked, stepping closer to Eddie.

“Oh my, this could be fun.”

“Whatever you’re thinking,” Eddie warned, “don’t.”

But Richie didn’t listen, because of course he didn’t. He stalked towards the bed, a mischievous twinkle in his eye, the devil cackling on his shoulder and his mouth twisted into that stupid self-satisfied grin.



*Why are you smiling so much?* Eddie wanted to ask, *it has been the worst fucking week, and I've got a hole in my face.*

Apparently, he said it out loud too, because Richie was grinning, "I've always got something to smile about when I'm with you, Spaghetti."

Eddie ignored the way his cheeks flushed hotly, or the way his stomach fluttered like a tuning rod, or the small peak flying across the heart monitor's screen out of the corner of his eye.

"I'll wipe that smile right off your face, Trashmouth," he managed, bottom lip stiffening in an action he hoped his faltering resolve would follow, "and don't call me that."

"Sure you will, Eds," Richie smiled.

"And don't call me Eds," he added, ignoring the way his breath hitched. He needed his fucking inhaler, "You know I always hated that."

"Mmm," Richie said, tilting his head, as if contemplating it, "I don't think you do though. You wanna know what I think?"

Richie's hand fell over Eddie's own, and he tried not to think about the way it practically dwarfed his or the way his fingers twitched to lace between those of his childhood best friend.

"No," Eddie said, noting the steady spike on the screen and praying

to God Richie didn't see it.

"I think you secretly like it," Richie murmured, eyes boring into his own, face mere inches apart from Eddie's, and holy *fuck* — was that his breath ghosting over his lips?

*"I think you like it when I call you Eds,"* Richie practically whispered, and that was the proverbial straw that broke the proverbial camel's back.

As if on cue, Eddie's heart monitor started beeping loud and insistently like a wailing child.

*Way to fucking narc me out,* Eddie bitched to it telepathically, *God, I fucking hate this place.*

For a minute, Richie just stared at him, eyes flicking between his heaving chest and his wide eyes and then down to their now-intertwined hands. Eddie yanked his palm away from Richie. Richie fucking beamed down at him, "I knew it!"

"You gave me fucking coffee, dickwad," Eddie said weakly, still in a daze and wondering why he desperately wanted to lean back into Richie's warm touch so much that it almost hurt, "I hate it when you call me Eds."

"I know," Richie said, smiling, finding his hand again and squeezing it tight.

Eddie looked into his sparkling eyes, searching for something he couldn't quite place. Before he could figure out if he even found it, he was speaking again, unaware he had even opened his mouth. He didn't know what he wanted to say or what he would have said if he could have gotten the words out of his drugged-out mind and through his mouth fast enough. But then again, he felt as though he wouldn't be saying whatever he was going to say if he wasn't drugged up in the first place, which was the problem. All he knew was that it started with Richie's name, and so he started there, nearly melting in the familiarity, and yet anguished by the overwhelming feeling that he was stepping into unknown territory.

*“Richie —“*

And that's when the nurses came in, shooing Richie off the bed as they adjusted the machines hooked up to Eddie, poking and prodding and fussing over him as they examined his vitals.

He briefly caught Richie winking and grinning back at him before leaving the room. Eddie slumped back into his bed, heart thrumming in his chest and mind racing even faster.

*What the hell was that all about?*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Some pure Losers Club fluff before I torture you guys again. ;)

Also Eddie is so fucking whipped for Richie. <3

## 22. Chapter Twenty Two

### Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you enjoy this next chapter! Those who have read the book, let me know what cheeky references you spotted in this chapter, there's a lot! We're moving into a huge Stan-the-man plotline, what do you think is going to happen? Let me know your predictions and thoughts in the comments below, I'd love to hear your ideas!

And, as always, thank you for reading, and enjoy these last moments of calm before we really get into it ;)

Richie Tozier wasn't even out of the hospital before he was nursing a new cigarette between his teeth.

He grit down on the dry paper, mouth tacky with that special kind of dehydration that came in the early hours of the morning when the world was still bleary and you were floating in that warm state of semi-consciousness. His eyelids remained at half-mast as he shook off the final remnants of sleep, tongue faintly throbbing from the burn of hot coffee. No tardier than the first step outside of that white, stale building had he fumbled for his lighter, pressing the flame to the end of the cigarette and inhaling gratefully, eyes fluttering shut.

He hummed contentedly around the drag, making his way over to his red Mustang, blazing in the morning sun. Mike had drove it over from Richie's house sometime early this morning on the Losers' coffee run, and he was silently appreciative for that. The rest of the Losers had gone back to the townhouses, presumably to grab something to eat and take a fucking *shower*.

Richie dipped his head slightly, grimacing at the musk that emanated off of him and his clothes. He would shower *sometime* today, he decided, just not now.

He rubbed the fob key between his pointer and thumb, the car beeping gently as he unlocked it, clumsily clambering into the driver's seat.

*I really should have picked a bigger car* , he thought distantly as he huffed against the leather seats, closing his eyes as a wisp of smoke filtered up from the cigarette nursed between his lips.

He blindly reached over to shut the door. Fuck it, if Eddie's four hundred pound mother could squeeze her fat, negligent ass into that Vista Cruiser, Richie could do this.

He laughed drily around the cigarette, pulling the car out of the crowded parking lot, rolling up beside the ticket console.

" *Fuck* ," he muttered, fishing his credit card out of his pocket, feeding it into the expectant gaping mouth of the machine, which beeped approvingly, spitting out a ticket stub that Richie yanked out with a roll of his eyes.

The green lights blinked at him like eyes, as if deciding if Richie was worthy to let go. It reminded him of those Sphinxes Ben was always going on about as kids, those desert creatures that stood guard. Ben said they could eat you if you got their riddle wrong, Richie wasn't so sure.

*“How is a lump of sand going to eat a person? Use your head, Haystack, and lay off those Twinkies, I think they’re killing your braincells.”*

The road block lifted, and no sooner had the blazing yellow rod left the ground before Richie was barrelling through, probably etching a nasty scratch on the car’s red paint, but none of it really mattering. All that mattered was that he was out of that suffocating hospital, and by the time he rolled onto the open streets, sunlight pouring through the open window, he felt himself breathing for the first time in hours.

It wasn’t that Richie wanted to be away from Eddie. Quite the opposite actually, and that was the problem. Once he had Eddie back, it was like all he wanted to do was look at him, touch him, feel that warm pulse thrumming beneath his skin and watch those eyes as they rolled at his jokes through his own, gazing past a layer of brimming tears.

He just wanted to breathe Eddie in, make a home right in that junction between his beating heart and his weakened lungs. He wanted to lay across his body, feeling the lull of vibrations radiate and echo through the emptiest parts of his chest as he laughed. As Eddie laughed, that’s all Richie ever wanted. He remembered, remembered it so clearly it seemed disrespectful to question if it really happened at all. He would become stupid— of course, any boy falling in love with another boy in a small town of people who can’t help but talk was by definition, incredibly stupid as it was. But Richie played it up.

He would sneak cigarettes out of his dad’s back pocket and smoke them clumsily, tilting his head towards the sun. And the pads of his

fingers would ache with burns at the end of the day, but it was all worth it to see the brown-haired boy laugh.

*“You’re so stupid,”* he would chide him, *“you’re going to make yourself sick.”*

But there was no real heat behind his words, that was all melting against Richie’s cheeks as he flushed scarlet red, pulling him under his arm and revelling in the soft touch of skin against skin as he pretended, just for a moment, that Eddie was his. Because the world was cruel and frowned upon boys like Richie, boys who too often found themselves staring just a little too long at curly-haired boys in arcades or the way their best friend looked in the light.

The ground hated boys like Richie, weeds pulling at his legs and tripping him up as if to pull him six feet under, burying him right alongside the ugly, rotted heart of Derry, to be forgotten and ignored. The wind whispered taunts as he ran home from Eddie’s, a grin plastered across his face and skin buzzing where Eddie’s hand had brushed against his own.

*Fag, fairy, sissy little gay boy,* the wind taunted in his ears. The air carried the sound of Henry Bowers’ battle cries as he drove his sharpened slew of insults into Richie’s chest like a dagger, and that was proof enough that the world didn’t smile down on boys who loved their best friends just a little too much.

But sometimes, while traipsing through the overgrown brush of the Barrens, the setting sun would beam down across Eddie’s face, bathing his pale skin in a soft golden light. His dark eyes would melt to pools of amber, and the spray of freckles across his nose would look like stars from where they dotted his flushed cheeks. And Richie

knew that the sun smiled down on boys like him as he watched Eddie gaze sidelong at him, his mouth quirking into a quiet kind of smile.

And maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

But things had changed. They were no longer thirteen year olds drawn impossibly close together by shared trauma. The wounds had never healed, but maybe they found their surrogates somewhere else. Some pains never heal, just get masked by less imposing faces that would greet you every night when you crawled into bed alone, at the mercy of your past and the things that lurk in the dark.

Richie found the same kind of resigned comfort in the amber liquid at the bottom of his shot glass as Eddie did staring into the cruel, manipulative eyes of his wife.

And when Eddie was well enough to stand, Richie had no doubts that that's where he would be retreating. Not because Eddie was weak, no, not by any standards, but because Richie understood the seductive ways of the past and the way it so often seduced you into building your grave inside your childhood fears. You would always have a home in your earliest traumas, and it would call to bring you home every night. When an old friend calls, it's hard not to pick up the phone, and it's oh so easy to return back to what's familiar, what you know for certain in an uncertain world.

But maybe Richie was just projecting onto Eddie. Maybe he *did* love his wife in all her matronly, dowdy glory. Maybe he liked driving a desk for a living and coming home through a blur of windshield wipers cutting across the horizon as he lulled himself to sleep with pills for sicknesses he didn't really have. Maybe he just wanted to imagine that Eddie was only leaving out of obligation, because it was



easier to accept that he was running away from Derry rather than willingly running towards something that wasn't Richie.

Stalled in early morning traffic, Richie groaned and hit his head against the steering wheel a few times, setting off his car horn with a long, obnoxious ' *honkkkkk*.'

The car behind him beeped back angrily, the sound like a foghorn breaking through the air. Richie stuck his head out the window, craning his neck to get a good look at the driver.

"Oh yeah, real mature!" he yelled.

The car honked again, and he realized that the cars in front of him were now pattering along the road, nearly disappearing from sight.

"Fuck," Richie cursed, stepping on the gas and flying down the gravel roads of Derry.

Without even knowing it, he lead himself to the pulsing heart of his childhood, and stepping out of the car, he began the trek.

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Richie swatted past the long grasses, ignoring the way they slashed red scratches across his skin as he ambled further into the Barrens.

If it was barren back then, it certainly wasn't now; weeds clambered over every surface of the ground, uncut grass protruding from the earth like stalagmites, or like the broken shards of glass buried in the cool dirt. Distantly, he heard the faint gurgling of the sewers, the exit tunnel just a few feet away, sending rapids of water tripping over the rocks and towards the Canal, which was only about half a mile away.

He spared a glance at the murky darkness, remembering how dank and dark it had been, wading through that black water, his joints ticking like a clock as each following breath was punched out of him with every step. He remembered seeing Eddie's drenched, unmoving body sprawled across the shore like a ragdoll, all in a tangle of limbs and aquatic plants that had wrapped themselves around his legs and arms. He cast one look at the sewers and snarled:

"Fuck you."

He hurried along the water's edge, letting himself be dwarfed by the monstrous trees, that didn't seem so much as though they lived in the sky, but enclosed it.

Like a snowglobe, Richie wondered, if someone were to disturb the natural balance of things, would everything come tumbling down?

He followed the line of trees until he was utterly surrounded by them, until the sky disappeared from sight. Pale sunlight pored through the gaps in the trees, and Richie watched it, particles drifting through the air like they were caught in the Deadlights. With a shudder, Richie fell to his knees, hands raking through the earth as he unveiled the rusting hatch of the Clubhouse, pulling himself down the rungs until he was landing on the floor, sending a cloud of dust

billowing around him as he coughed drily, waving it away. He walked around, shoes clicking softly under him, mingling with the groan of the old floorboards as they strained against the passages of time. He let his fingers dance across the posters tacked on the walls, slumping down on the cheap plywood floors, holding the corrugated tin where Stan had stashed their showercaps.

*“For the use of the Losers only ,”* Richie read, eyebrows drawn and knitted close together.

He missed Stan.

His eyes fell upon a tangled strip of beige fabric strung from two wooden posts in the middle of the room. Seemingly by their own volition, his legs walked over to the hammock, and Richie didn't fully realize that he had stood up in the first place until he was nestled in the suspended fabric, wrapped in a thin layer of dust and the overbearing need for sleep.

Letting his eyes flutter shut, Richie slipped into a dream.

*It was 1989 again, and Richie was in the clubhouse alone. He was tangled in the thin fabric of the hammock, a frayed comic book splayed across his lap, coke bottle glasses dipping down the bridge of his nose.*

Distantly, he heard the sound of crooning, low and smooth across the room.

Richie squinted, spotting a lithe figure at the end of the room, their back to him as the singing continued softly.

*“I’m so young, and you’re so old. This, my darling, I’ve been told.”*

Richie’s breath hitched, feeling like he was tumbling over the dizzying precipice of something so horrifying you couldn’t look away. No, it couldn’t be.

*“I don’t care just what they say, ‘cause forever I will pray.”*

Richie’s heart stopped, a dead weight in his chest, and it crawled up his throat, a warm, wet, pulsing mass in his throat as he let out a choked sound.

Someone from his childhood had been able to do an eerily accurate *Paul Anka* imitation. Yes, Richie remembered.

*“He can sayng! ”* Richie had yelled, slinging an arm around his shoulder, that hot day in the summer of 1989. His own voice was unrecognizable, slipping into his infamous Pickaninny Voice, *“ Want you to sign right here, boy, on this dotted line. We’re going to grow your hair out, boy. Going to give you a git-tar—“*

And the boy had just rolled his eyes, smiling a good-natured smile, a ghost of a grin. He had always been so adult, even as kids, like he didn’t know how to be young, like he was chilled by the overlooming shadow of something only he could see. The shadow encroached on his childhood like clouds over the horizon and etched premature

wrinkles into his face, digging him an early grave and insurmountable levels of fear. *Fear*, he had always been so *scared*.

The boy turned around, facing Richie. Blood covered his clothes, and his fingers were trembling. He was smiling, a bubble of thick black liquid spilling out of his crooning mouth and over his lips like hot tar, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes, which were glassy and weeping the same ebonite tears, streaking coal-miner lines down his face.

*"You and I will be as free,"* he sang, vowels gurgling over that blackness spilling from his lungs, *"as the birds up in the trees."*

Richie whimpered, breath a distant dream as his lungs constricted like an iron fist had closed around his chest and squeezed.

He looked at the blond curls plastered to the boy's waxy forehead.

*"Stan."*

Stan-who-wasn't-really-Stan-or-who-maybe-was stumbled towards Richie, grimacing. He clutched his stomach, and when Richie's eyes darted down to follow the movement, he saw a gaping wound in his chest, spilling out thick rivers of black blood, dropping wetly to the ground. His cold hands closed mechanically around the edges of the hammock, straggling in his grip as he inches further away from the approaching boy. A sob died in his throat as he looked up and was met with the face of—

*"Eddie."*

Blood spilled over his mouth, spilling down his chin and soaking the front of his shirt just like it had at the Neibolt house that summer. His eyes were glassy, and they twinkled with tears. He was right beside Richie now, peering over him, looking impossibly small and impossibly frail.

His eyes were dark and sallow, as if crudely dug into his pale face, cheekbones hollow and skeletal as he smiled a mirthless smile at Richie.

“*Rich*,” he spoke through a bubble of blood, “*your ten minutes are—*“

—up,” a voice said, rousing him out of his sleep.

“Ah! What?!” he choked out, scrambling for a grip, the hammock tipping over and disposing him on the dusty ground.

Richie groaned as his glasses dug into his face, panting with his cheek pressed into the cool dirt where a loose floorboard had dislodged itself.

“I said,” Beverly laughed, patting his shoulder, “you should be getting up.”

Richie groaned at the crick in his neck and the dull ache in his back as he pulled himself into a sitting position. He was too fucking old for

this.

Looking around, he saw the rest of the Losers' faces, *Mike, Ben, Bill...*

"Eddie," Richie said hoarsely, swallowing, "where's Eddie."

Beverly frowned at him, crouching down and pressing a hand to his head, brows knitted in obvious concern. Richie hated that look, that pitiful sympathy.

"Richie, he's back at the hospital still. Are you feeling alright? Did you hit your head?"

He swatted her hand away, gulping and propping himself up against one of the thick wooden stilts of the Clubhouse, glaring at the concerned eyes of the rest of the Losers.

"I'm fine," he said sharply, running a hand through his hair, plastered against his forehead.

"Okay," she said simply, and Richie was grateful for that. She always knew when to let things go, it was why she was his best friend, "well, we're starved. I think we might head over to that new Italian restaurant down the street."

The Losers chatted amiably, bubbles of laughter reining in the conversation as Richie tried to push that image of Stan and Eddie

convulsing at his feet, black blood spurting from their mouths like fountains as they writhed and paled in front of him.

*"Rich, your ten minutes are up."*

*Just a dream* , Richie told himself, shuddering , *it was just a dream.*

"What do you think, Richie?"

Richie blinked dumbly, staring up at them, "Huh?"

Mike laughed, "Oblivious as ever, Trashmouth," but Beverly looked troubled as she watched his glazed eyes.

"I s-s-said," Bill reinstated, smiling, "you coming to dinner with us? Italian food sound good?"

*Dinner?* Richie thought, *how long had he been out?*

"Yeah," he said, "yeah, that sounds good. I think Chinese food is ruined forever for me."

Bill helped pull him up, clamping a friendly hand down on his shoulder as they walked towards the later.



“If that means I never have to hear your Chinese Coolie Voice ever again in my lifetime, I think I’m okay with that.”

“Don’t be such a Debby Down-awh, Big Birr,” Richie said in his terrible rendition of a Chinese accent that was definitely fifty shades of wrong, “I feel like, if I get good enough, someday I’ll earn your love.”

The Losers laughed, and Bill shook his head, “You’ve been saying that for twenty seven years, Trashmouth.”

“Hey, I never said it would be easy!”

Bill just laughed, pulling him into a loose headlock as they walked, “Keep telling yourself that.”

Bill grimaced, pushing Richie away with a shove to his greasy curls, “And Richie? Take a shower, you smell like death. *Eddie* smells better than you and he literally came back from the dead.”

Ignoring the mention of Eddie, Richie made sloppy kissing gestures at Bill, leaning in closer to him, only to get a palm to the face Bill started to grip the rungs of the ladder.

“Fine,” Richie said dramatically, “but I expect a football field of fettuccine alfredo in return for my services.”

The Losers just laugh, Beverly smacking Richie on the can to get him moving, and he started to follow Bill up the ladder, stepping out into the warm summer day. As they fell into comfortable conversation, Richie slowly felt himself relax. He pushed the dream out of his mind and let himself bask in the easy laughter of his friends. It's not like the dream meant anything anyways. With a twitch of his heart, Richie decidedly concluded:

*Stan was gone, and he wasn't coming back.*

“Hey, wait up!” he called to his friends, and bumped elbows with Bill and Beverly as they made their way to Mike's car, ready to put the past behind them.

## 23. Chapter Twenty Three

### Notes for the Chapter:

Here's 5.2k words of fluff before shit starts to get real. Also bonus points to whoever can spot the Richard Siken reference. ;)

Also I love reading your comments, each one inspires me to keep writing and I love seeing your thoughts and reactions and predictions! I hope you're enjoying it ☐💖

An hour later, Richie sat in the red leather booth of the Taste of Italy restaurant. His stubble shaved close to his face, glasses clean and perched atop his nose, black curls washed and soft around his ears. His fingernails were clean and meticulously cut in a way that Eddie Kaspbrak would certainly approve of, and distantly, Richie wondered if he subconsciously did that because of him.

Beverly had practically pushed him into the shower when they got back to the Townhouses, and then insisted Richie dress up when he went back to his house, much to Richie's repeated protests, but he humoured her, because when Beverly Marsh tells you to do something with the fire in her eyes burning as bright as her flaming hair, you *listen*. He fiddled with the sleeves of his white dress shirt, tucked into his pressed grey dress pants. His jacket was slung across the seat behind him, and he drank his water idly as they waited for their food to come.

“Wow, you clean up nice, Trashmouth,” Beverly hooted, whistling lowly as Richie laughed into his glass.

“You sound shocked, I’m offended,” Richie scoffed.

“No offence, Rich,” Ben piped up, “but you do come across as the kind of guy who would wear a Hawaiian shirt to his own wedding.”

“I still could, Haystack,” he shrugged, wiggling his fingers pointedly, “I’m a single man.”

“I can’t possibly imagine why,” Bill joked, letting out a small ‘oof’ as Richie punched his shoulder.

“Whatever happened to you and Eddie’s mom?” Ben grinned, sipping his wine.

“Ah, the old witch bit the bullet years ago. Guess it’s time to hit up Myra then, huh? It’s basically the same thing anyways, looks like Eddie Bear has a type.”

Mike rolled his eyes, Bill snorting as he fiddled with his watch. It was a nice watch, sparkling silver with a cool antique interface. There was no denying Bill was well off, taking one look at the band around his wrist or the navy suit draped across his broad shoulders. But he was successful in that modest, respectable kind of way. That quiet way of having everything together that never ceased to marvel Richie, even after thirty years. He was still the same strong, powerful Big Bill they all knew and loved as children. As Richie took a sip of his wine, he thought to himself, that it was nice that some things never changed. That while the world was turning, there were familiar smiles along the way to ground you in your roots. That, regardless of where you go, you’ll never forget where you started, and that maybe, you all return back to that place eventually, and find you can still call it home. Find that, really, it’s never been anything but.

“Beep beep, Richie,” Beverly smiled at him.

She truly was radiant, the sun seemingly to not just reflect upon her hair, but rather burn within it. It cascaded down her shoulders sheathed in a see-through shawl with tiny little encrusted jewels embedded in it. She was wearing a simple red dress, hugging her soft curves. Dainty pearl earrings glimmered in her earlobes, and her smile was pulled from ear to ear, cheeks flushed under the soft glow of the restaurant, skin milk-white and dotted with light freckles. The ring on her finger winked in the light, as did her thick-lashed green eyes as she grinned playfully at him.

If Richie wasn't so far gone for Eddie, in some alternate universe, he thinks he could see himself loving Beverly very well. She was hard not to love, with her sparkling presence and warm voice. In that moment, Richie found himself very grateful that she was his friend.

As the Losers chatted good-naturedly, Richie stared into his glass, watching the wine settle and flow. It had been awhile since he'd been this dressed up, he thought to himself, it was—

*A warm summer evening, one of many others that were to follow. California was sunny, golden, and bathed in the pale twinkle of the skyline at night.*

Richie was sitting at a booth not unlike the one he sat in with the Losers right now, directly across from a beautiful girl.

Her skin was flawless, like porcelain, her cheeks bathed in a soft pink. Her hazel eyes glimmered like diamonds beneath the charcoal-coloured eyeshadow chalked across her lids. Her eyelashes fanned across her cheekbones like shadows in the early dawn, and as she leaned forward, her twinkling silver pendant dipped between the soft curve of her breasts.

Looking back on it, she looked a lot like Beverly Marsh.

Richie couldn't for the life of him remember her name.

"This doesn't seem to be your kind of scene," she said simply, hand closed around the base of her glass, nails lacquered ruby red.

"Is that so?" he asked, sipping some poison of his own, eyes unmoving and bored where they stared at the wall over her shoulder.

"I think you're here for the press," she said, pursing her lips as wine stained them a pretty maroon, "I think that when you go home at night, you lose that cool exterior. I think you're a very bored man, Richie Tozier."

Richie laughed drily, hands closing around his glass, staining fingerprints into the globe, "I think you don't know a goddamn thing about me."

"Maybe so," she smiled, "but isn't that the best outcome for these kinds of things?"

The words rung in Richie's head twenty minutes later as he was escorting her out of the cab, kissing her all the way into his lonely apartment as they stumbled backwards, Richie lost in that dizzying precipice as he tumbled right over. He fell back into the bed, the woman close behind as she crawled up his half-naked body, kissing bruising, *searing* kisses into his skin, trailing a guilty line up his neck and jaw. Richie squeezed his eyes shut as his hands hovered over her bare hips, ghosting a touch, but never really leaning into it. A promise, or maybe a plead. Both went unheard.

There it was again, that overwhelming dread. That twist in his gut and burn in his throat. That looming memory, like something was stopping him, something he was forgetting. Something he was *indebted* to. Like he was a slave to his past, but willing in the submission to it, only he couldn't for the life of him place what he was longing for, how to fill that gaping canyon in the junction between his ribs and his heart that he didn't know got there in the first place.

"Look at me, Richie," she said, tracing a hand down his chest.

His eyes stayed squeezed shut, the weight between his legs limp and unmoving as her kisses seared burn marks across his shoulders.

"Richie," she said again, "look at me."

Richie did. His eyes fluttered open, falling upon the topless woman perched across his hips, her thighs pale and soft around his own. He took one look at her green eyes, the promise of everything he could have, if only things had been different...if only *he* had been different.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do this,” he managed to choke out, staring blankly at her breasts.

She peered down at him through dark-lidded eyes for a moment, looking unsurprised, but quietly judgemental all the same. And then she was dismounting, shrugging on her trench coat and picking up her panties from the ground, just like in the movies. She fussed with her hair in the mirror for a moment, looking at Richie in the mirror, hunched shirtless over the bed.

“You’ve got something in your past, and it’s chasing you, Richie,” she said, tugging the belt of her coat tighter around her waist, “you better sort that shit out.”

All Richie could do was stare blankly at the wall. The way you did when you were breaking down, in the way where you’re not really looking at the wall, per se, but away from something else harder to stomach, harder to face. You’re half-naked and slumped over like a drunk and you think to yourself that you didn’t do a very good job painting that wall. But it doesn’t really matter of course, does it? But you tell yourself that it does because it’s better to focus on the exposed drywall than your exposed heart, writhing and bruised in plain air, or the half-naked woman boring holes into the side of your face with her eyes, and you wonder distantly if she *knows*.

Knows your *dirty little secret*, knows the shadows that make themselves at home in your heart at night, knows you as well as she claims to as those piercing jewel-toned eyes bore into the side of your face as she straddled your shaking thighs.



Distantly, he thinks, *Big Bill. He used to ride that bike into the morning sun, like he was trying, like he was trying to beat the Devil.*

And then, to his horror, he starts laughing, that nonsensical phrase pulled from the silence meaning nothing to him, but holding so much power nonetheless.

As he sat there, laughing half-naked on his bed in the dead of night, Richie wondered if he was going crazy.

*That night, on his terrace, under the twinkling tapestry of stars and the searing burn of the skyline across the horizon, flaming like a livewire, Richie smoked his first cigarette in nearly twenty seven years.*

Richie tipped the last of the wine into his mouth and as the waiter placed their food around the table, he willed himself to forget.

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Richie sucked in a breath, cheeks hollowing around a cigarette as he cast his face towards the sky, a pillar of smoke billowing from his parted lips.

“Trying to dine and ditch?” a voice said behind him, and Richie smiled as Bev sidled up beside him, “That’s a low ball, even for you.”

Richie chuckled, looking up at the night sky.

“You’ve really gotta stop smoking,” Beverly said, plucking the cigarette from his fingers, but took a drag herself, grinning through a cloud of tobacco, “such a bad influence.”

“Don’t try to fool me, Marsh,” he said, taking it back from her, “I stole my cigarettes from you as a kid, remember?”

“How could I forget?” Beverly smiled, rocking on her feet, “Took them all and couldn’t even smoke ‘em properly. Richie Tozier, or as I liked to call it: *One Hit Wonder*.”

Richie laughed, coughing on a cloud of smoke as he shook his head, “You’re brutal, Bev.”

“See? Can’t even smoke them thirty years later,” she took another drag, “let it go, Richie.”

“Lay off it, wah-man, an’t a boy smoke tah catch the attention of his true love?” Richie said in a truly terrible Voice.

“He can,” Beverly said, looking at him with a small smile, before continuing in a tone that clearly addressed what she had been skirting around saying the past few days back in Derry, “I’m just not that person.”

Richie sighed, and she followed in turn, handing him back the cigarette, which he took a hasty drag of before stubbing it out with his foot.

“Richie, you’ve gotta talk to him, honey.”

“Beverly, he’s *hurt*. He had a monstrous clown fucker impale him with a crab leg and now he’s alive again after being *dead* for three weeks. The last thing he needs right now is to think his best friend is creeping on him.”

She shook her head, “You really don’t get it, do you?”

“Get wha—“ Richie started tersely, before being interrupted by approaching footsteps.

“Cheapin’ out, Richie?” Bill chuckled, walking towards him, Mike and Ben close in tow, “I know your comedy career isn’t struggling that much, I’ve seen the numbers.”

“Your mom’s running me dry, Big Bill,” Richie said, pausing before adding, “and not just my bank account if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, you’re so full of s-s-shit, Tozier,” Bill laughed, swinging an arm around his shoulder as they walked to Mike’s car.

“That’s not what your mom said last n—“

“Beep beep, Richie,” Ben interrupted.

“Fine. But I call shotgun!” Richie hooted, clumsily sliding into the passenger seat.

“That’s our Trashmouth,” Beverly smiled, ruffling his hair.

And as Richie settled into the leather seats, Bill casting him a sidelong, unbelieving glance and softly rolling his eyes, Richie felt young again, just for that moment. For a fraction of time, hazy and soft like the gentle, bittersweet endings of a dream, it was the summer of 1992 again, sun pouring through the windows and beaming across his face, the rest of his life laid sprawled out before him like a winding red carpet, or a gleaming yellow brick road, or his too-gangly legs intertwining with Eddie's as they crammed themselves into that tiny hammock.

As Bill put the car in reverse and pulled them out of the parking lot, Richie thought to himself that maybe, just maybe, all of this was enough.

Training his eyes on the window beside him, he watched his childhood pass by in a blur.

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“Remind me *why* we’re standing outside in the freezing cold again,” Mike huffed as he fiddled with his belt, where his sheriff’s badge sat emblazoned on his hip.

Beverly pulled Ben's jacket—which he had ever-so-graciously slung over her shoulders moments before, closer to her body, dipping her chin into the collar, nestled under Ben's stupidly muscular arm.

*Oh yeah, he was totally getting laid for that tonight*, Richie thought, only a little sulkily, and turned back at the gang with a shit-eating grin.

"What, like you've never broken into the rotting arcade of your childhood."

"Can't say that I have, Rich," Mike frowned, gazing up at the dilapidated structure.

"Oh, and you have?" Bill snorted, jostling Richie's shoulder.

"I have, actually, Big Bill, somewhere between the avenue of *'not being a pussy ,'* and *'thinking Eddie was a bag of dead bones.'*"

"Rich—" Ben started, frowning, admonishing him with a startled look.

"Are you gonna come with or not?"

The Losers exchanged mutual glances, having a silent debate before glaring back at Richie, probably looking not unlike a puppy who just dug a hole halfway to China, and conceded.

“This is *so* illegal,” Mike sighed, hunching up as small as his large frame would allow, landing impossibly smooth on the floor below.

“You’re lucky I love you,” Beverly laughed, climbing lithely through the gap.

“And *you’re* lucky I’m not fat anymore,” Ben rolled his eyes, tumbling in after his girlfriend.

Richie turned to Bill expectantly, grinning so wide it almost hurt, “Whaddya say, Big Bill?”

Bill pursed his lips, a crease cutting a line between his furrowed brows, “I hate you for this,” he said finally, and Richie cackled triumphantly as he ducked in through the empty window pane.

“Say, it’s a good thing you’re not really *big*, Bill, Big Bill.” Richie started to crack as he clumsily fell through the gap.

He cut himself off mid-sentence as he saw Bill staring blankly down at his wrists, face pale and looking far, far older under the unrelenting shadows of the night. But his eyes, the blatant, raw fear swimming within them, was so young that Richie found it hard to reconcile the man standing in front of him with the stuttering, sure leader of his childhood, jaw set in determination as he took on adversaries bigger than himself, bigger than *all* of them.

Bill didn't look like that self-assured, confident leader Richie looked up to through a blur of smudged coke-bottle glasses and hazy, young, blind idolism.

He just looked *scared*.

And maybe that's what punched the breath from his lungs, making him fumble for an inhale he most certainly didn't need, for a disease he most certainly didn't have.

His eyes followed the path of Bill's, where his wrists were slashed and bleeding with thin pin-stripes of red, raised white skin curling over it like the unfurled pages of a battered book. The streaks of red dripped down his arm, careening onto a large shard of broken glass, staining it with flowery tendrils of blood.

*The oath* , Richie thought dizzily.

And then Mike, Beverly and Ben were rushing over, Bill stuttering out a weak, "M-Muh-My w-w-wrists!"

"Oh my God," Beverly breathed, holding Bill's injured hands, stroking a thumb up his palm.

"*Fuck* ," Mike hissed, examining the slash marks, which, thankfully—looked rather shallow and uglier than they really were, "looks like the glass cut you."

“We should just go back—“ Beverly started, looking concernedly at Ben, who watched with a troubled face.

“N-N-No! I’m *fine!* J-J-Just get the first-aid kit off the wall!” Bill said harshly, shocking them into action as Ben mutely handed the white case over to Mike.

Richie watched the blood drip off the shard of glass with a sort of morbid transfixion, wondering why he suddenly felt like something very big had changed. The stiff commotion placated after a few moments, the soft sounds of bandages being wrapped loosely around Bill’s hands the only noise occupying the room. Richie didn’t dare breathe.

And then Mike laughed softly, “Too bad Eddie’s not here.”

Richie chuckled, a smile finding its way up his lips as he imagined what the little hypochondriac would have to say about this situation.

“Believe it or not, Dr. K broke in here with the ol’ Trashmouth years back. And no you don’t, he would probably criticize your bandaging technique”

Richie waited a beat before slipping into a voice, shrill and petulant, “*“Did you even disinfect the wound? Does disease control mean nothing to you?”*”



Mike laughed, looking over as Richie rose to his feet, slowly walking across the floor, "That's pretty good, Trashmouth."

"Yeah, you get good at knowing a person's voice after annoying them your whole life."

*After being in love with them your whole life*, he thought.

"Hey, looks like they kept this old piece of junk," Richie said, but his voice was fond.

The Losers watched as he approached the large steel box in the cobweb-infested corner of the room, covered in a thick layer of dust and a black tarp. Richie tore the cover off, revealing the finger-print smattered glass of the old claw machine.

"Say, Mikey, you got any power in here?"

Mike rolled his eyes, walking over to a fuse box, shoes clicking on the grimy floor as he pulled a keyring from his pocket, swinging the door open with a metallic screech, flipping a line of switches.

"Maybe I should win Eds something," Richie grinned, tapping on the glass, where an impressive array of stuffed animals still sat.

Wrinkling his nose, Bill said, "I think he would kill you."

As the lights came on, illuminating the old arcade, Richie grinned.

“Got a quarter?”

---

*The year was 1989, the sickly pale of twilight was steadily encroaching on the summer's day, pouring in through the windows in beams of soft white. The steady trill of Street Fighter buzzed in the air, silence clumsily following as Richie pulled the plug, tucking the socket behind the console where they had found it.*

A few feet away, Eddie was quietly watching the big metal box of the claw machine, wrapped in that warm blanket of drowsiness as his eyes zeroed in on a small blue bear, but as he gazed at Richie, the underlying rush of the summer seemed to thrum beneath his skin.

Richie could understand that.

“So, I beat you at Street Fighter how many times, Eds? Remind me again,” he grinned, sidling up beside him.

“Oh, shut up Richie. And don't call me that,” he added, but sounded distant as he stared into the streaked glass windows of the arcade machine.

Richie's smile only grew at that, eyes twinkling behind his coke-bottle glasses. He felt unbelievably endeared, a fuzzy warmth spreading across his chest and starting to creep up his ears as he watched Eddie's wide eyes and small frown.

"See somethin' you like, Spaghetti?"

Eddie jumped back like he'd been burned, scowling at Richie as a flush rose up his cheeks, worrying at his lower lip almost indignantly.

"No! Do you even *know* how many germs are in those things? I could probably catch ten diseases just looking at it!"

Richie let Eddie ramble in his usual fervent manner, smiling fondly at his familiar pinched face and the shrill tone to his voice.

"And..." Eddie said softly, frowning at the glass, "they're so *girly*."

He spat out that last part like it was one of those disgusting diseases he was always going on about, and Richie had no doubts he was thinking about those 'girly' men down the street with the nice manicured lawn and what his mother had had to say about them.

They're so *gay*, the words went unspoken, but heard all the same.

Distantly, and certainly not for the first time, Richie thought, *he was going to kill Mrs. K.*

And then, with the finesse only achieved by a boy hopelessly in love, Richie said, "Awe, but Eds, you are a pretty girl! You'd make a fine, fine wife, lassie!" he added, slipping into his Irish Cop Voice.

Squirming out of the noogie Richie slung him into, frowning up at him red-faced and cheeks squished against Richie's forearm, he sighed, "You really are a turd sometimes, Richie."

"Only sometimes?" Richie crowed triumphantly, pulling him closer to his chest, "Aw, Eds, I dare say you're softening!"

"Don't call me that," he griped, pushing his way under and out of Richie's arm, where he had been held against Richie's chest, "and come on, asshole, my mom's gonna kill me."

Holding up a quarter, the gleaming silver winking in the pale moonlight, he grinned, wiggling his eyebrows, "Then it won't really matter how much later you are then, right?"

Eddie crossed his arms, pinning Richie with an accusatory glare before conceding, stepping forward and sighing sadly, "My face is probably on a milk carton by now."

Richie just smiled, eyes trailing the claw as he maneuvered it around the box, not letting the little huff or the way Eddie's small hand closed around his bicep distract him from the game, or the way his heart was currently crawling up his throat.

---

Richie didn't win the bear that time, or the next time, or the next. It was only when he'd emptied his pockets clean of spare change and Eddie was branding fingerprints into his arm as he practically dragged him outside that he finally admitted defeat, still sulking all the way home.

"You just used up all your allowance, idiot," Eddie snorted, "you really can't not be competitive for once, huh?"

Richie just stared ahead at the deserted horizon, ignoring the way Eddie's hand brushed against his, or how warm his pulse was beneath his skin, or the almost overwhelming need for the words, it's not like that, to come out of his mouth.

Instead he snorted, "I always finish first with Mrs. K, of course I'd be competitive, Eddie my love."

Eddie just frowned as they turned the corner onto his street, "I'm not sure that's something to be proud of."

Richie suspected Eddie truly didn't know if it was something to be proud of. Eddie could tell you fifty different ways he could die in any given situation, but as far as sexual education goes, the slate seemed to be one big question mark, courtesy of good ol' Mrs. K, of course. Richie ignored the thought and the way it sent a hot ribbon of heat that even he didn't fully understand yet curling in his abdomen and rising up to his cheeks.

He just swallowed thickly, finishing lamely, "That's just how hot your mom is, Eds."

Eddie seemed to look inquisitively at him at that, noting the slight crackle in Richie's voice and the distant, unplaceable look in his eyes. Richie didn't dare meet his imploring gaze.

Luckily, they were standing in front of Eddie's house, and like an old dog letting go of a bone, Eddie dropped the conversation.

"My mom's going to kill me," he said gloomily, looking down at his cast, where his arm was still fractured from his fall at the Neibolt house.

"She doesn't have to know," Richie said, voice suggestive.

"What are you saying?" Eddie frowned at him.

"I'm saying you could climb through your window."

"Are you kidding?" Eddie hissed, looking nervously through the windows, soft light was coming from the living room where Mrs. K was most certainly watching her game shows on the couch. He shook his head, "Do you want me to break my other arm?"

Richie rolled his eyes, “Don’t worry, Spaghetti, I’ll hold your hand the whole way up.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“Would you rather face the wrath of Jabba the Hutt over here and be the first person in history to get murdered during a game of *Wheel of Fortune*?”

Eddie bit his lip, brows furrowed, creasing soft lines across his forehead. He sighed, sidling up the the side of the house, “I really hate you sometimes.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Richie scoffed, boosting him up past the eaves of the roof, following closely.

They were lucky Eddie’s house was low to the ground, as short and stout as the paltry excuse for a mother that lived inside. Richie’s own mother always said houses reflected the family that lived within them.

Richie wondered distantly if that’s why his house always seemed so empty.

Slapping Eddie’s can good-naturedly, he watched as he clumsily slid the second-story window open. Inside, a soft light beamed over the neatly made bed and the considerably less neat stack of comic books splayed across it.

“Well? What are you waiting for, Christmas? Get in there, Eds,” Richie swallowed thickly, trying to ignore how desperately he wanted to climb in right after him.

“Beep beep, Richie,” Eddie said softly.

And then he was climbing through, landing with a soft sound and pulling the window shut. Richie sighed out into the night air and began to descend, walking all the way home.

---

After coaxing three bucks out of old man Wentworth on Wednesday and swiping a fiver from his wallet on Thursday, he still hadn't won that damn teddy bear. By Friday, he sat bear-less, pride-less, and one week's allowance short as his dad noticed the missing money and decided to play bad cop. By Saturday, Richie was forgetting, and by next week, it was like it never even happened. It's funny, how distance makes everything seem so much clearer. Or maybe it's just that the future is increasingly blurry and everything else looks like a sweet dream in comparison.

Oh well, hindsight's 20/20, as they say.

But that Thursday night was still remembered as a blurry smudge of red-hot frustration, charcoal grey delirium, and the stomach-turning greenness of puberty's less dignified faces. He remembered stalking



home from that stupid arcade, glasses pressed firmly against his nose and hands shoved half a mile deep in his pockets, kicking pebbles as he walked the empty streets, muttering petulantly to himself.

*“That game is fucking—*

*—rigged,”* Bill snorted from where he sat on the counter, watching Richie carefully pluck up a small blue bear and navigate it towards the opening, “I tried winning those for Juh-Juh-Georgie all the time as a kid. Never won him anything once.”

“Watch and learn, Billy Boy,” Richie grinned to himself, and with disbelieving eyes and a shaky twitch of euphoria, he dropped the bear straight into the hole, the machine clunking celebratorily as the stuffed animal tumbled out into Richie’s hands.

Ben whistled lowly, and Bev smiled at him, looking impressed, “Well I’ll be damned.”

“Nice going, Rich,” Mike said, clapping him on the shoulder, “I didn’t know you were so good at he claw machine.”

Richie stared blankly at the teddy bear, thumb grazing over its soft stomach, “*I wasn’t.*”

“What do you say we ditch this place?” Mike said, patting Bill’s shoulder, “I think we’ve had enough adventure for one night, don’t you?”

Mike looked at Bill's bandaged hands pointedly, and Richie thought he saw a cloud of concern pass over his face.

"Yeah," Richie agreed, following them one by one out the door, which Ben had managed to unlock, "sounds good to me."

If anyone noticed the way he clutched the bear closer to his chest as the car rolled down the streets, or the overly wistful look in his eyes, they didn't say a thing.

---

The Losers departed at the hospital parking lot, Richie stepping out into the cool air, teddy bear tucked snugly under his arm.

"You sure you don't need a ride home, Rich?" Beverly asked, looking softly at him under the pale glow of the streetlights.

"I'm sure, you guys go ahead," Richie said, looking towards the hospital doors, "there's something I gotta do first."

Beverly smiled knowingly, blowing him a kiss, "Go get 'em, Romeo."

For a moment, Richie faltered, before playing it off as what he hoped could be interpreted as 'smoothly,' making a show of fixing his hair in the rear view mirror, slicking it back with a licked palm for added

effect.

“The nurses won’t be able to resist this hotness,” he winked, “they’ll be wheeling *themselves* out of here by the time I’m done with them.”

“Beep beep, Richie,” the Losers said in unison, and Richie just grinned as they drove away.

He took a deep breath and walked through the door.

When he entered, he nodded in greeting to the drowsy looking secretary, only making it halfway through the blinding white corridor before the nurse they saw earlier stopped him, making her rounds down the hall.

“I’m afraid Mr. Kaspbrak is asleep,” she apologized, not looking very sympathetic at all.

“Oh great,” Richie said, moving to walk past her, shit-eating grin plastered across his face, “he’s a drooler, it’s adorable. Couldn’t miss it for the world.”

She stopped him with a gentle hand on his chest, “He’s on some pretty heavy drugs,” she warned.

“Welp, there goes his lifelong dreams of being a professional tennis player.”

Amazingly, the nurse laughed softly, taking well to Richie's shrugging '*babies must play*' look and returning it with an amused one of her own.

"He totally could, I mean, have you seen those calves?" Richie babbled, the looming exhaustion apparently removing his filter altogether.

He'd better get out of here before he said something about Eddie's ass.

"His vitals are very healthy," she agreed amiably, before pinning Richie with a knowing look that made him squirm, "*although*, his heart monitor went off quite unexpectedly this morning," she added, smiling.

"Huh. Weird," Richie said, ignoring the flush that crept up his neck.

"An odd occurrence indeed," she said, looking amused as she watched Richie turn his eyes down the hall, "and although you're his boyfriend—"

"*Friend*," Richie said hastily, blush flaring even more boldly across his cheek, "we're just friends."

"—I'm afraid only marital spouses are allowed in past visiting hours,"

she finished, mouth twitching into a smile as he fumbled for words in front of her.

“Did I say friends? I meant we’re married. Totally. The wedding was beautiful, we had a five layer cake and a live mariachi band. You should’ve been there.”

She laughed, the sound soft and hushed in the empty corridor, “If that were true, you’d be the best married couple I’ve ever seen, seeing as you still have that flirtatious bickering.”

“Actually, me and his mother have a thing—wait,” Richie paused, looking like a very indignant deer in headlights, “*flirtatious bickering?*”

The woman, Richie couldn’t believe his eyes, winked, and then looked pointedly at the teddy bear in his hand, “Is that for him?”

“Oh!” Richie said, looking down at it, trying for ‘cool’ and missing the mark by a considerable margin, “Yep, that’s for the ol’ Eddie Spaghetti.”

“I’m sure he loves that,” she chuckled.

“The nickname or the bear?”

But she just took the teddy from his hand, “I’ll be sure to see that it

gets to Mr. Kaspbrak safely.”

Richie just watched blankly, a little stunned as she walked away, heels clicking on the linoleum floor. She paused a few steps ahead, turning back to look at him.

She shot him a thoughtful look, tilting her head, “He talks in his sleep sometimes, you know.”

And then she was walking away, disappearing down the hall as Richie watched, baffled.

*What the hell was that supposed to mean?*

## 24. Chapter Twenty Four

### Notes for the Chapter:

A chapter of the Losers adjusting to life back in their hometown. Eddie was found alive, but nothing is ever simple. After all, as Mrs. Kersh said, nobody ever really dies in Derry.

Just a heads up that this chapter does include two mentions of vomiting, and tackles the Losers' past trauma, including allusions to Stanley's death scene and the sexual abuse Beverly faced at the hands of her father. All instances are very light and non-graphic for the sake of my readers, but please proceed with caution if any of these themes are sensitive for you.

If it's too graphic to read, you can find a safe synopsis in the end notes so you can still follow along with the story. :)

Love you all <3

Bill Denbrough's bare feet pressed flush against the cool tile floor of Derry Townhouses, the frigid embrace welcome with the stiflingly close, near-suffocating heat of his racing mind, trilling under his skin like a fever.

He was like a dog licking over the same wound, stepping over the same ground worn to shambles with each torturous, redundant footfall. There he was again, as young and as horrifically old as he had been that summer. Everything that can get in must have an equal means of getting out, surely. So there he was, pawing at the same bastard thoughts bred out of insanity like a cat with a ball of yarn; manically entertained and hoping it all doesn't unravel around him.

*He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists—still insists, he t-t-thrusts....against the p-p-posts, (goddammit), and still, (he STILL), insists he sees the ghosts.*

There he was again: dragging himself down the same cracked roads of his childhood, scraping his knees and burning his lungs, bringing his fists down on the pavement and his head between his knees as he pray to God he doesn't hear a voice down in that desolate, endless sewers. The haunting memories of his childhood playing like a stanza as ice cold dread ran through him like a fever.

The low fluorescent lights of the townhouse cast a burnt yellow tinge to the room, tendrils of sienna overreaching the peeling wallpaper, dripping down in dim imitations of shadow puppets. He shivered, stepping into the slick bath, muscles twitching and groaning as the ribbed porcelain dug between his shoulder-blades, working out a knot wound tight in his back. He let his eyes screw shut, the bath water creeping up the nape of his neck, biting at the lobes of his ears as he relinquished all control to the inviting warmth, shivery warm and close against the cool air fanning over his skin, creeping through the metal grates of the broken heat vent.

He closed his eyes, and it was the summer of 1989 again.

*Grasses as tall as your hipbone brashly made a home on your exposed shins in the form of shallow red slash marks, rays of pink desecrating the sun-kissed skin of the Losers as they stood huddled in the Barrens, a grim looking on their faces.*

Far too grim for anyone of the age of thirteen to be wearing. If an adult had been down there— well, if an adult had been down there,



the Losers wouldn't. Grownups were always overly concerned about safety, prioritizing it over the generally accepted unquelled childhood lust for adventure. That was besides the point, because they *had* been down there that day in the Barrens, no adults in sight, bearing expressions they did everything to deserve. But if there had been an adult down there, that day, they would have said:

*"What's a kid like you got to worry about? You aint seen nuthin' yet."*

But they *had* seen a lot, far more than any grownup could ever imagine, could ever fathom, could ever bear to tolerate themselves.

And so, like an adult watching kids put peppermints under the tree, knowing full well Santa doesn't exist, and that if a fat man ever does climb down your chimney, you probably smoked some funny grass—the Losers accepted a kind of superior knowledge apart from anything their elders might have said. And maybe that's why they had all looked at Bill so reverently that day, looking for some kind of truth in a senseless world between the faint crease in his eyebrows, inside that steely look on his face. Just as easily as the trauma had bound them together, it drove them apart. They had hardly seen each other after that summer, hanging out in pairs or groups, but never again in those twenty seven years did the Lucky Seven all breathe the same air.

And that, Bill suspected, was exactly how it was supposed to be.

But there, in that moment, brambles scaling a trail of heat up his shins, where a light splattering of pre-pubescent peach fuzz was beginning, sun beaming down on them over the rolling horizon, they were together.

He had approached Stan, bandaged wrapped tightly across his cheeks, nestled snugly under his chin and over his temples, where thick brown curls spilled over across his forehead.

He pinned him with a steely look of fear, green eyes boring into Stan's hazel gaze, face pinched in a look of reluctant complacency.

*"S-S-Swear it,"* Bill said, stepping towards him.

Stan had looked down, resigned as ever as he looked at his usually immaculate sneakers, tainted with grime and blood that rocked the core of Stan's world.

He had nothing left to lose.

And then he had nodded, eyes teary and scrunched up

*"I swear, Bill,"* Stanley had said quietly as the broken glass dug into the softness of his palm, spilling a thick bubble of maroon spilling over his knuckles and onto the dirt below.

*I swear, Bill. I swear—*

Bill looked down with a sickening pull at his gut, nearly spilling out the sour bile crawling at his throat as he was met with the sight of

pink water.

Then an image, *adult Stan hunched over the side of the white tub like a ragdoll, eyes blank and shiny, the picture of horror, and wrists streaking—*

Ugly gashes of red down the line of the bath, careening in a sick nosedive towards the white tile floor. His bandages had come undone, wrists spilling blood where he had cut them on the broken window earlier that night. The chromium faucet echoed his horrified face, pale and sickly looking as it twisted and distorted with each violent tremble of Bill's body. Bill opened up his mouth and let out a soundless scream, clambering out of the tub with a faint warble in his throat as he keeled down on the blood-stained bathroom floor, emptying his stomach's content into the toilet bowl.

Faintly, he thought he heard the sound of children laughing bubbling up from the sewers, where the draingargled and spat as the red water drew towards the sewers like a moth to the light.

*It's all your fault, Bill.*

He braced his head in the crook of his arms, slumping over the tile as he began to sob.

---

In a room a few doors down, Beverly Marsh was having a shower.

She welcomed the tickly warm drag of water against her skin, stale and dry from the nights' events. Steam billowed around her pale body like a cloud, hugging her breasts and grazing the small of her back, where a small line of freckles lay. Her auburn hair was plastered to her forehead, long and twisting as it careened down her shoulder-blades, lips dark pink and softened in the onslaught of steam. She let her eyes flutter shut, lashes a dark shadow on the high of her cheeks. She sighed contentedly, leaning against the tile wall in earnest as the warmth did wonders to loosen the tension at the junction of her neck and back, melting away like a receding tide.

The bathroom had always been sort of a sanctuary for her growing up, it was the only room with a functioning lock, the only place where beer bottles ceased to lay splayed across the floor, mingling in soot-coloured cigarette burns etched into the carpet.

It was the only place she was safe from her father's hand, striking down to burn red handprints into her skin.

But he was too drunk to fumble with the rusted lock, and it was in those moments, hearing the wheezing snores of her father in the living room that Beverly would breathe for the first time in days, sometimes weeks, letting her shaking knees buckle as she curled up on the tile floor. And then, when she felt brave enough, when the angry red belt marks would placate against her shins, she would crawl into the empty bathtub and clutch that postcard to her chest.

*Your hair is winter fire, January embers. My heart burns there too .*

The bathroom had seen the scared little girl become the woman she

was today, and maybe that's why it all meant so much.

She remembered being thirteen that summer, hunched in a corner of the bathroom, skin tacky with tears and wrists still burning where the harsh metal buckle of her father's belt struck her twenty minutes before. Pulling herself to her feet, shucking her shorts down around her ankles as she sat on the cool porcelain seat of the toilet. And then, like a dark cloud rolling over the horizon, like the static in the air before a storm, a single drop of crimson red blood seeped through her white cotton underwear.

It looked almost accusatorilly at her, like the unforgiving eyes of a jet-black raven, as dark and as endless as the night

As accusing as her father's voice as he gripped her wrist painfully tight sometimes, leaning into her hair and whispering:

*Are you still my little girl, Bevvie?*

She stared blankly down at the tendrils of blood seeping through her cotton underwear. It felt wrong. Violating. Like a murder in a child's playground.

*Daddy never makes me bleed,* she thought deliriously.

Beverly knew far too much for her young age about what others could do to her body and startlingly little about how it worked for her. She gazed blindly down between her legs with the kind of horrified look of a person watching their childhood slip behind the

trees, and held a shaky kind of realization behind that fog of brimming tears.

Looking back, it was not when she first came face to face with It, but then that her childhood innocence ended.

Beverly remembered yanking her shorts back up, face flaming like her auburn hair as he stuffed a wad of toilet paper down her panties and slipped past her father. That was the day she met the Losers, the first time the Lucky Seven came face to face, a small brush in history that would echo for the next twenty seven years, ending as it began; with the shedding of blood. She remembered her father tucking her hair behind her ear: tell me you're still my little girl. She remembered slipping into the bathroom, taking scissors to those curls, sending them careening into the drain, twisting like dampened flames.

*She remembered the voices in the sink, the way she leaned over the drain, training an eye on that dank tunnel down below. She remembered the blood, so much—*

Blood.

Just as it had twenty seven years ago, thick splatters of red erupted from the drains like a babbling river spitting up currents.

It was impossibly warm, mingling with the hot spray of water from the showerhead, but sent an unbearably cold chill through her body as the blood clung to her body like rain clings to a tarmac after a flood. Beverly's mouth fell open into a soundless sob, muscousy, blackening blood strung across her pale skin, soaking pink against the

expanse of white like an overturned wine glass shattering at a roar.

The sound, almost ripped out of her, echoed through the room. Beverly took in a breathless, hitching gasp, and then she started to scream.

---

Ben Hanscom was poring over a dusty book when his fiancée first stepped into the shower. Five minutes later, unbeknownst to him at the time, he would be joining her, watching her cling shakily to the shower curtain, his own heart crawling up his throat.

*His own secrets dying on his tongue.*

But for that moment, Ben Hanscom was reading a book.

The Derry Townhouses had an entire three walls of thick, yellowing books. A thick layer of dust as white as snow that would truly appall Eddie Kaspbrak sat accumulated on the shelves. Ben wasn't thinking about the diseases he could catch from it, however, as he plucked a familiar book off the shelves, dusting the filmy cover with the palm of his hand.

*The History of Old Derry*, the book read.

Sitting himself on the faded couch, right in front of the fireplace, Ben

opened the book, and started to read. It was rather amazing, really, how easily he fell back into it, even after nearly thirty years, he found himself mouthing the words trailed across the pages, knowing it by heart. In that moment, it was like it was 1989 again, nestled up in Derry's library while other kids yelled and played outside, flying down the roads of Derry on bikes or on foot while Ben-who-was-not-quite-Haystack-yet wrote a haiku for a girl that would never notice him.

*I'm gonna marry that girl, if I ever get the chance,* he remembered thinking one day, watching the soft orange light of winter pour in through the class' windows, bathing her in a sleepy-warm glow, hair flaming like a chariot meant for Icarus himself.

Ben smiled down at his hand, where a small gold band sat snug below his second knuckle. Getting to call Beverly Marsh his wife was one of life's sweeter surprises.

He turned through the book, devouring it with rapt enthusiasm and the low buzz of remembrance. He came across the page of the old Derry Easter bombings and cringed, gut turning at the sight of the poor kid's disembodied head nestled bloodily between the branches of a barren tree. He flipped a few pages ahead, feeling a little sick to his stomach when the book landed on a segment Ben hadn't remembered reading before.

Like getting thrown into a lake in the summer, icy cold dread seeped through Ben's clothes, a shiver wracking through his body despite the fire roaring three feet away. Like a car-wreck, Ben found himself unable to tear his eyes away, going against all his screaming instincts as he turned the page.



“ No, ” he breathed, book dropping into his lap in a way that would ache a very sensitive place a few hours later when he finally could see past the white haze of confusion and the searing trill of fear.

There, on page 321 was Ben’s smiling face, alongside the rest of the Losers. The pages seemed to turn on their own volition, revealing pulse-stuttering, gruesome images of Pennywise, and in one memorable photo that would etch its way into Ben’s memory forever, he was holding a live, still-beating heart, a bloody grin on his face. But the image to finally knock the air out of his lungs was of Stan—or, rather, the horrifying spider Stan they saw in the sewers. Pincer legs protruded unnaturally from his temples, where a face-tearing grin crawled its way up to, eyes black and soulless.

*‘ I GUESS STAN JUST COULDN’T CUT IT, ’* blood spelled out in crude letters across the pages.

Ben stared, paralyzed in fear, hands trembling and blood thinning as his head grew dizzy, fear crashing over him like a tidal wave, wringing the air from his lungs and wrapping around him like a second skin. Even before It, being scared in Derry was an open invitation for someone to rip your throat out, and even knowing that, Ben couldn’t bring himself to cease the dead hammering in his heart.

There comes a point where fear is so overwhelming, that all you can do is watch in horror as the cruel jaws of forces larger than you close around your throbbing heart.

He might have stared at the book for hours, if not for the distinct ripping sounds as the creature resembling Stan tore through the pages, spindly legs wrapping around the frayed cover. Ben let out a choked yell, tossing it across the room, and was about to cough his

throbbing heart up onto the floor when he heard the scream. Taking one last look at the book sprawled across the floor, looking normal as ever, Ben ran upstairs as fast as his legs would carry him, and willed himself to forget.

---

Mike Hanlon wasn't proud of himself, he decided as he looked over the weeds of the Barrens, a cloud of smoke reaching up towards the sky from the butt of his stolen cigarette.

But then again, none of his proudest moments had been spent in Derry. Most formative moments, maybe, most horrifying for sure. Mike was starting to wonder if he ever had a single proud moment in his life.

He remembered his father telling him something when he was very young, clinging to his mind in the way a small child clings to their parent's arm, vivid in the way no memory should be at that age. It was clear enough and hopeful enough to instil doubt into Mike's mind that it ever happened at all. But it was a thought that kept him warm at night, so he kept it close.

*"I ain't never hard a proud moment in my life 'til I first held you, Mikey,"* his father had told him.

*Yeah, Pops ,* he thought with a chuckle, blowing a puff of smoke up towards the night sky, shoulders slumping, *well, I ain't never had a kid of my own.*

In that cruel way life sometimes operates in, Mike spotted a small

figure crouched by the canal, funnily enough, as if thinking of kids had somehow brought one into existence.

Mike didn't laugh, however. He knew the kind of power thoughts had in Derry.

Instead, he just brought his hand down on the badge holstered on his belt, walking slowly towards the figure, as if trying not to spook a deer. He had been sheriff for awhile in Derry, you live in a place long enough and people start pushing you into office, and the title still stood, even though he was signing papers to fully move to Florida.

He called out lazily into the night, stopping a good ten feet away, "Go home, boy. Kids like you shouldn't be hanging around here this late."

Mike shivered as he remembered the curfew ordained in Derry that fateful summer, the weight behind that order, even if they hadn't known it yet. And maybe it was that thought, or the way the figure didn't respond or even flinch at his voice that propelled him forward, stubbing out his cigarette with his heel as he made his way towards the water bank.

"Hey—kid, I said head on home, alright?"

He touched the figure's shoulders, red polo bathed in the pale moonlight, and then felt the air get punched out of his lungs as the boy finally turned around.

“I can’t go home, Mike. Because of you. You were supposed to protect us. You watched Derry for twenty seven years and you still couldn’t save me.”

Mike heard a garbled sob he would later struggle to place as his own or of the boy in front of him.

There, blood-soaked and bleeding from gashes on his pale face stood Stan, face crumpled in the picture of horror, the picture of fear, the picture of betrayal.

*“You left me! ”* he sobbed, voice shrill and deafening against the silence of the night, *“You’re not my friends, you made me go into the Neibolt house!”*

“Stan, no!” Mike said, reaching for his arm.

But Stan only looked him straight in the eye, trembling like an epileptic as he whispered once more, *“You left me.”*

And then he was gone.

Mike found himself looking over the still canal, cool water lapping over his pant legs, not a single other person in sight. He shakily brought a hand to his face and was surprised when it came away wet, soaked with tears. *I’m going to get the hell out of this town as soon as I can, and I’ll never come back,* Mike promised as he trekked back up the hill to his car, beeping as he pressed the fob, headlights cutting

through the darkness of the night.

*Stan was gone. No amount of reliving the past could ever change that , he told himself bitterly.*

He turned the key into the ignition, and started to drive back to the townhouses.

*Somewhere in the sewers, Stanley Uris stirred.*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry this chapter took so long! I've been struggling to find time to write in between assignments, but I have a ton of ideas for this story and plenty more chapters to come, so please keep reading if you feel so inclined! A lot of you have been asking if IT is coming back, and this chapter may allude to the idea that Pennywise is returning, so I just want to clear up that IT is not present in this story. :D

The Losers are just experiencing a ripple effect from Stan's death and subsequent resurrection, and are exhausted and suffering from blood loss, in Bill's case, which is causing the hallucinations. I tried to make the hallucinations tailored to each Loser's individual trauma and the intensity varying based off how close they were to Stan, Bill having the most violent reaction because,,, Stenbrough.

Also we're totally getting some reddie content in the next few chapters, I'm not starving you guys, don't worry, LMAO. Love you all, thanks for reading (as always), and feel free to leave comments or even things you'd like to see happen in the book and I'll try to provide that quality fanservice. ;)

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SYNOPSIS (in case you skipped): The Losers experience hallucinations relating to Stan, Bill's wound bleeding out into the bath, mimicking the death of Stanley Uris as he remembers making Stan promise to return back to Derry if IT ever comes back, seeing flashes of Stan's death in his mind. Bill hears voices coming from the sewers and he gets out of the bath, getting sick into the toilet and starting to cry.

Beverly has her own hallucination, the shower spouting blood, reminding her of her own childhood trauma and paralling the gruesome death of her good friend Stanley. She falls down to her knees and screams.

Ben is downstairs, reading The Old History Of Derry book. He reflects fondly upon his feelings for Beverly and enjoys reading the old book until he sees images of the Losers and Pennywise on the pages, dropping the book and letting out a yell, hearing a scream from upstairs that belongs to Beverly. Taking one last look at the book, he rushes upstairs and wills himself to forget.

Mike is standing out in the Barrens, smoking a cigarette and reflecting on the troubled state of Derry and his own life. He sees a kid standing by the canal and tells him to head home. Upon a closer look, he realizes the kid is a young Stanley, who tells him it's all his fault that he died and repeating his 'you left me' monologue from all those years back. As Mike comes to, Stanley is gone, and he goes back into his car, driving home and promising to get the hell out of Derry as soon as possible.

Hope you enjoyed! :D

## 25. Chapter Twenty Five

### Notes for the Chapter:

Just a cute little reddie chapter before the storm. There will be a lot more reddie from this point on, so rest assured a lot of gayness is on the horizon. Also, happy Halloween! What are you guys going as? I'm going as Eddie, I've got a red shirt, those tiny shorts he wears, white tube socks with rainbow stripes, a LoVer cast and an inhaler, I'm super excited. I hope you enjoy the chapter, and tune in on Friday for the next one!

Richie huffed a nervous breath, hand still poised on the cool metal doorknob as he let himself into the hospital room, immediately greeted with a strong medicinal smell that was so Eddie that if Richie closed his eyes, he could imagine he was in Eddie's own childhood room again.

He half expected Sonia Kaspbrak to come bumbling through the door, painting expletives with a skilled flourish that even Richie couldn't help but be impressed by. But she didn't; it was just Richie and Eddie and the constantly underlying question of *RichieAndEddie* and the steady beep of the heart monitor poised bulkily across the room. And then there was the gentle huffs of Eddie breathing, somehow looking pissed even as he slept, and the deafening sound of Richie's heart skidding to a screeching halt in his chest, and Richie wondered if the room was even quiet to begin with all all.

But it was drowned out by a more pressing thought, expanding and swelling like one of those balloons at the carnival games, and it burst in the form of a ragged gasp, painting the walls with the bold declaration:

*Eddie was holding the bear Richie brought him.*

Eddie was holding the bear Richie brought him, and it was tucked beneath his chin, drawn to his chest, where his legs fought against the heavy linen sheets to snake their way up towards his bruised ribs. And he looked so young and so vulnerable, and every bit the petulant, bossy thirteen year-old he'd been the summer of 1989, but God, none of that really mattered, because Richie was so far gone that it stole the breath from his lungs and the thoughts from his mind, zeroing in on the simple fact that he was terribly in love with Eddie Kaspbrak, and had been since before he could put a name and a face to the warm feeling in his chest.

Along with the the understanding, inevitably followed the shame. It had been one of life's more brutal awakenings.

He let out a shuddering breath, shrill and a bit hysteric with the promise of a nervous bout of laughter bubbling up in his chest, and reached for his phone with shaking hands.

“Don’t you *dare* fucking take a picture, Tozier,” Eddie grumped from the bed, popping one eye open and regarding Richie with the most distasteful look he’d ever seen.

Richie’s heart twinged.

He laughed, swallowing dryly, “Awe, but Eds, you look so cute! Cute, cute, *cute!*”



He tried to ignore how much his mind was screaming at him that he really meant it, that he always did, that he should tell him now before he loses the chance because for once in his life, Eddie could actually die.

*Eddie did die, and now he's here and telling Richie to go fuck himself what the fuck —*

“You better not fucking pinch my cheeks, Richie, I swear to God, I’ll kill you,” he warned, bringing his hand up to the gauze plastered across his face.

“You think I would touch your hole-punched face? You wound me, Spaghetti—“

“Don’t call me that—“

“But, tell ya what, Eds—“

“It’s *Eddie* —“

“Every day I dream of pinching your sweet cheeks,” Richie grinned, slipping into that comfortable state of uninhibited vulgarity, “and then I get a boner and have to stop.”

“That is so fucking gross, I cannot *believe* you, *oh my God*—“

“Oh, so you *do* know what fucking is.”

“Yes, Richie, I know what *fucking* is! I have a *wife*!” He yelled, saying the last bit more more like a question than a statement.

Call him sick, but boy, oh *boy* did that bring a smile to Richie’s face. A smug, near-painful smile of the shit-eating variety.

“You’re telling me you *ride* that ride?”

“We are *not* talking about my sex life in a *hospital*!” Eddie hissed, looking appalled, “I’m pretty sure there’s some dude dying down the hall.”

Richie knew he should stop, knew he should shut his big Trashmouth before he went too far. But then again, Richie never knew how to do that for long.

“So you’re saying there *is* an appropriate time to talk about your sex life?” he blurted out, only half joking. God, he needed to sit down.

“No!” Eddie all but yelled, turning bright red in the face before adding, “*Especially* not if it concerns you!”

“*Yowch!* Eddie Kaspbrak gets off a good one, folks!” Richie hooted,

going into a Voice, before abandoning it just as quickly. “Ben *Handsome* though, what a ride.”

Eddie looked mortified, burying his face in his hands, mindful of the gauze plastered across his cheek. “Oh my God, do you ever stop talking about your dick for one second?”

“Nah. Once I fucked your mom, it never went down again.”

“She’s been dead for *twenty years*, asshole.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. Railed her into oblivion, it happens.”

He just shook his head disbelievingly, glaring at Richie with a tired look.

“Too far?”

“Beep beep, Richie,” Eddie rolled his eyes, no real bite behind his words.

Richie looked at him, perched on the chair beside his bed now, watching the early morning sun filter in through the window and dance across his too-pale face. He could use some sun— preferably of the West Coast variety. Staring into his dark brown eyes and the stubborn stray curl falling over his forehead, Richie realized with a kind of abject horror that he wanted to pack Eddie on a plane and

bring him home.

Not home to New York back with Myra, but back to *California* with *him*.

“You should probably call Myra,” Richie said, uncharacteristically quiet, hating how shy and uncertain his own voice sounded, like a man reluctantly martyring himself.

Then, because apparently Richie craves death, he added sorely, “Y’know, before she starts eating people.”

Eddie just ignored the quip, and when Richie looked up from the scuffed floor, he was startled to see Eddie staring back at him. His voice was soft, smile quirked in a dim kind of annoyance. It was so familiar and so much like home that Richie could have walked right through it, made his bed and lay in that throbbing, aching pulse of love, and then died a happy man in it.

He loved him so much it fucking *hurt*.

“I don’t want to call Myra,” Eddie said honestly, Richie’s eyes as wide and white as they were in the Deadlights. And then, as if startled by his own starkness, he coughed, looking down at the white linen sheets and adding, “not yet.”

“Eddie,” Richie said, heart a weak tremble in his chest, hands a more violent one where they lay sprawled across his knees.

Eddie looked up, looking guilty and flighty and every bit the child who used to take his poison with a resolute, miserable, *"Yes, mommy."*

Richie realized his own hand was gripping the bedspread, knuckles paling like his face. Everything was so sickeningly white, it felt more like winter, Richie's bones feeling like barren trees ready to snap at any minute at the weight and drag of it all.

*What are you running from, Eds?* he desperately wanted to ask, *what are you running towards?*

Richie was still trying to find his words when the nurse walked in.

"Well," she grinned, slipping in through the door, paying no mind to the way Richie and Eddie jumped apart, "I'm delighted to say I have good news for you both."

"The super hot nurse that sponge-bathed Eds decided ol' Richie Tozier could use some lovin' too?" Richie quipped, jumping gratefully on the opportunity like a wanted man slipping into another train carriage.

"How the hell would that be good news for me? And don't call me Eds," Eddie spat back, glaring at his curly hair, as if it was that, and not his volatile trashmouth, that personally offended him.

“I’d let you watch,” Richie winked, and he thought he heard the nurse stifle a laugh at Eddie’s reddening face.

The nurse just shook her head, leaning over to put a new IV bag on Eddie’s machine, her necklace hanging just past the blouse of her scrubs.

“As enticing as that offer is, Mr. Tozier, I’m afraid that won’t be necessary. We would like to run some tests on you before we release Mr. Kaspbrak over here, however. Your friend was telling me you were in the same conditions as Eddie?”

Richie rolled his eyes, letting out a long, suffering groan from his mouth, gaping open in an angle that definitely wasn’t even remotely attractive, and out of the corner of his eye, he could have sworn he saw Eddie shake his head.

“Bill told you that, didn’t he? The fucker, I liked him better when he had the stutter.”

“*Richie!*” Eddie chastened him, looking appalled.

“Oh. Right, I forgot you had a hero complex for Big Bill back in the day. C’mon, he’s got a receding hairline!”

“So do you!” Eddie yelled, a bit hysterically.

“Wow, low blow, Eds.”

“Shut the fuck up, dickwad, and for the the last time, *don’t call me—* wait,” he swivelled around to glance at the nurse, who honestly didn’t look that bothered by their bickering, “you’re releasing me?”

She smiled, “Well, don’t tell me you want to stay?”

“No, it’s just—“

Richie could see the emotions flit like fan blades across his pinched face, waging war against each other as his left eye twitched a little. Richie recognized it as the look Eddie got when he really wanted to do something, but thoughts of germs and disease invaded his mind like an unwelcome relative. It was the same look Eddie wore that summer every time the Losers would jump into the Quarry. Richie wondered if that’s how he looked right before he kissed too. His shoulders slumped, sighing in reluctant agreement, and Richie felt the overwhelming urge to pat his back.

He didn’t.

“Are you sure that’s safe? I mean, I had a *hole* through my chest like, three days ago!”

“Oh, you don’t need to tell me. You bled right through your sutures every hour that night,” the nurse said nonchalantly, leaning against the doorframe.

He grimaced, and then Richie *did* reach out, placing his palm protectively over Eddie's and squeezing tight, feelings be damned.

"It's like some kind of miracle the way your wounds closed up so fast, I've never seen anything like it. I don't know how you did it, but if you're feeling up to it, you could probably be released tonight."

Richie's heart jumped into his throat, looking sidelong at Eddie and scanning his face with fervent twitchiness, gauging his reaction. Of course, he would keep visiting Eddie in the dingy old hospital if he had to, but thought of bringing Eddie home...

Richie swallowed thickly, half expecting Eddie to demand to stay another week.

So, nothing surprised him more when Eddie simply sighed and squeezed Richie's hand, "Thank God. I don't know how much more hospital jello I could handle. And do you even *know* how much bacteria is in the water here?"

Richie just smiled fondly, feeling his heart flutter open and squeeze shut, like someone stuck a giant Chinese finger trap around his chest. He couldn't help himself as he leaned over, ruffling Eddie's hair and crowing, "Cute, cute, *cute!*"

He almost didn't mind the flat palm clumsily administered to the side of his face in some drunken semblance of a slap, and his lips twitched against the fingers that grazed over the side of his mouth.



“I’ll come back around noon to give you some instructions on how to care for your wounds at home, and we’ll also run some quick tests on you, Mr. Tozier. Then you’ll be free to go.”

The nurse looked almost regretful to see them leave, if not a bit excited to see them move forward with their lives. Or maybe Richie was just projecting onto her.

God, Richie’d never once dreamed he’d be projecting on anyone in a nurse’s outfit, and the vision was a truly horrifying thought. Eddie in a nurse’s outfit, however, now that would be something Richie could get behind...would *like* to get behind. Wait. What? In moments of such horrible, floundering confusion, Richie took a shot in the dark, targeting something, anything on that dartboard of wit to distract from the scratchy heat crawling up his cheeks. Like it often does, that dart landed right on the hulking, easy target of Eddie’s mom.

“Hopefully Mrs. K didn’t have the syph, huh, Eds?”

Eddie just scowled, punching him in the arm as Richie crowed out, “Yowch! Lay off it you angry elf!”

Eddie was about to respond, face twisted in a sour picture of disdain, the words ghosting over his lips surely scalding. Richie could almost see the smoke billowing out from his flaming ears when the nurse started to let herself out.

“I’ll see you in a few hours, Mr. Tozier, Mr. Kaspbrak,” she paused

with her hand on the door, “and try not to be too loud, will you? I’m pretty sure there’s a dude dying down the hall.”

---

As it turns out, time flies faster when you’re not cooped up in a tiny, stale room with your childhood best friend and three decades of repressed feelings trying to worm their way out of your mouth.

After a particularly rowdy session of bickering, the nurse came back, insinuating that maybe it was for the best that they let Richie and Eddie roam around. As it just so happens to be, there actually was a man dying down the hall, and he wasn’t too keen on Richie’s voice being the last thing he heard as Death squeezed the last paltry breath from his shriveled lungs.

*Weird.*

Richie made sure to voice this as he eagerly lead Eddie down the blinding white corridor, shoes scuffing against the linoleum, Eddie’s hand warm against the inside of his forearm.

“Would that be something if his last words were about me?” he grinned, staggering like a drunk towards the heavy doors.

Richie had had a growth spurt too fast, too soon, and it was evident in the clumsy way he marionetted his long limbs as he stumbled through life, a shit-eating grin pulled across his face.

Eddie didn't seem to mind. No, scratch that, Eddie seemed to mind a lot.

"That would not be *remotely* funny, dipshit!" he squawked, still having the grace to feign disbelief at Richie's rampant trashmouth, even twenty seven years later, "Nobody wants their last words to be your name!"

Because Richie is very dumb, and only human, and also had a very warm, very attractive Eddie Kaspbrak plastered needily against his side, and was fighting an awkward half-chub that stole all the blood from his brain, he did what he did far too often when he was nervous —

He said the wrong thing.

"My name could have been *your* last words," he blurted out, words tumbling after each other like teenagers tumbling out of a closet during a game of Seven Minutes in Heaven.

*Okay, what the fuck, Richie?*

That was low, even for him.

Luckily, Eddie didn't seem to notice, simply bumping his shoulder against Richie's in a way that he guessed was supposed to be the

closest thing to a punch to the arm in the position they were in.

“Keep talking and *your* last words will be my name. I’ll stab you right here, there’s a scalpel down the hall on that cart right there, and it’s not even disinfected. Did you know that? Hospitals are cess pools, it’s fucking disgusting.”

Richie just watched him rant in a quiet kind of awe, watching his eyebrows send creases across his forehead and tugging at his mouth as he frowned to himself, gripping tighter to his arm.

“Oh yeah, keep talking dirty to me, Dr. K.”

Eddie just shook his head, jostling him again before he leaned heavily against the wall as Richie yanked the heavy door open, grinning.

“After you, m’Spagetti,” he invited, wiggling his eyebrows.

Eddie just rolled his eyes, walking into the shorter corridor, “You’re absolutely insufferable, I hope you know that.”

But as he held on to Richie’s arm again, letting himself be pulled into his side as Richie swung an arm around his back, just like old times—Richie couldn’t help but wonder if there was any real bite behind his words.



## 26. Chapter Twenty Six

### Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the long wait! School is really kicking my ass right now and it is...very stressful lmao. But I love you guys and I've already pre-written the next chapter, so you can count on that being out this Thursday!! Thank you for your continual support and I really hope you enjoy this next chapter! <3

They were released at six o'clock on the dot, the long, spindly black arm of the analog clock barely grazing the twelve before they were stumbling out of the stuffy hospital; clumsy, a little drunk off the fresh air, and the week's long worth of barely-contained hysteria bubbling up to the surface. The rest of the Losers were waiting in the lobby when Richie and Eddie had emerged from the heavy steel doors, tripping over each other in a tangle of limbs and half-hearted insults as they leaned heavily against each other, both in a kind of blue-purple delirium pulsing in the air like a bruise rising to the surface of your skin.

Also, they were a little drugged out.

“Nurse gave me drugs, guys,” Richie slurred in a typical Richie fashion, dropping a heavy arm over Eddie's shoulder, which he promptly batted off.

“It was a basic sedative, dipshit,” Eddie rolled his eyes, giving in and letting Richie use him as a temporary arm rest as he lolled his head back and laughed. “Do you even know anything about health? It's a miracle you're not dead yet.”

Mike grinned at Eddie with a kind of fond recognition—the kind that seized Richie’s heart like an iron glove from the first time they reconvened after those twenty seven years. Then Mike was stepping forward, breaking through that space and engulfing him in a crushing bear hug, being mindful of the still-healing sutures stitched across his stomach.

The rest of the Losers followed suit, piling overtop of Eddie in a tangle of arms as he stumbled back and let out a quiet, ‘oof.’

Richie watched this exchange through a soft haziness and a coiled wave of envy. He gazed upon Eddie’s face, all sharp awkward angles and the softness of his skin where he never quite managed to grow facial hair, even after all those years. He looked at that and swore he could still see the sunlight bouncing off of his eyes, the slow and easy smile tugging at his cheeks. How long had he longed for this? How many times had he denied himself of this, of this simple touch that was so damn easy for the others in a way he had come to understand, and how, in the same sense, it was so hard for him in a way *they never would.*

How many times had he almost caved at every soft, “*Richie, Richie—*

Rich.”

“Huh?” he said intelligently, still standing off to the side, watching the Losers hug as his glasses slipped determinedly down his nose.

Then, Eddie held out the arm closest to him, peering up over Bev’s flaming curls, eyes inquisitive and a bit imploring. His quirked smile

looked slightly amused, like he'd been on the receiving end of a particularly terrible joke.

"Get in here, Rich," he said softly, beckoning him.

It was all Richie could take before he was letting himself be pulled into the tangle of limbs, Eddie's casted arm hooking around his shoulder and draping down over his back in a comfortable weight. He felt a lithe, feminine arm slide around his waist, a strong hand clamp down on his shoulder that could have been Ben, or maybe Bill.

"Good to have you back, Ed," he heard Beverly say over the deafening pulse of his heart in his ears.

And Richie buried his face in Eddie's neck, nose brushing against the fine hairs softly lining the nape of it. This was where they were supposed to be—the Lucky Seven, all together. It was always them. It always would be.

Closing his eyes, Richie let himself sink into his friends' arms and let himself breathe for the first time in what felt like weeks.

---

After being kicked out of more than one corridor for disrupting the peace and a strong admonishment from Eddie, the two of them had ended up downstairs in the hospital's cafeteria, sat at a linoleum grey table, perched on plastic-backed seats. Eddie poked the cup of jello distastefully—almost as if he was expecting it to jump out at him,



with the end of his spoon. His face was drawn into an expression of sheer disgust, mouth pulled into a grimacing frown, eyebrows drawn together, creasing harsh lines over his forehead. He sighed and rested on his palm, nose scrunched up as he flicked some stray crumbs off the table with a shiver.

“This place is fuckin’ disgusting.”

Richie, who had watched this whole scene play out through a lover’s set of eyes, just grinned, patting the top of his hand reassuringly, “Eat up, Eds. This might be the last time you ever get to eat shitty powdered jello.”

“I hope it is the last time,” Eddie snapped, pulling a face, “I can practically feel my tastebuds dying in my mouth, and for once, it’s not just because of you.”

Richie barked out a laugh, slapping a hand to his chest and leaning back, the metal legs of the chair screeching shrilly across the polished floors, “Yowza! Eddie Spaghetti gets off a good one!”

“Yeah, yeah,” he sighed, pushing the jello away with a drag of his knuckles, “I just want some solid food. And don’t call me that.”

“Would I or would I not be your knight in shining armour if I convinced Big Bill to pick us up pizza on the way back?”

Eddie raised his eyebrow, sipping his water and training his

narrowed eyes on Richie's grin over the rim of his glass, "If I say yes, will you shut up and get me something remotely edible?"

"Awe, Eds, you always say the sweetest things."

"Shut up, Richie. And don't call me Eds."

"Yes, your highness," Richie rolled his eyes as they stood up, walking out of the cafeteria. Hooking an arm around his shoulder, he mussed up his hair, "let's go, Romeo. Let's blow this popsicle stand."

And then there they were, three hours later, rolling down the street with a pamphlet of wound care instructions and five large pizzas between them. Not the proverbial separating wall that Richie typically envisioned, sure. But sometimes the only thing separating you and your childhood love is repressed feelings and five boxes of pizza, and that's just how it was.

They were driving a seven-seater Mike decided to rent from Derry's unglamorous car dealership, tiring of making the trips with two separate cars. So there they were— Bill at the wheel, Mike right alongside him, navigating and occasionally telling him stories of his time as sherrif in Derry, Bev and Ben stuffed into the back, and Richie and Eddie behind the front seats. The Lucky Seven, all in one car again, and Richie was still complaining about the tight squeeze.

"Are we almost there?" he groaned, shifting uncomfortably, trying to comfortably fold up his legs, to no avail. He shifted them to the left, then to the right, then drew them up to his chest before letting them drop again with an exaggerated sigh.

“God, do you ever shut up for one minute?” Eddie bitched, wriggling closer to the window when Richie wiggled his socked toes threateningly.

He had never gotten payback for Eddie’s antics in the hammock that summer and it had been a *really* long week.

“If you weren’t three feet tall you would get the struggle, Spaghetti.”

“For the last time, I’m 5’9, it’s like, the average height in most of the world,” Eddie rolled his eyes, picking at a stray tear of cardboard on the pizza box.

He seemed restless, but Richie supposed being confined to a tiny room for over three days would do that to you.

“Is that what you tell your wife?” Richie said, unable to hide the sourness in his tone as he worked a kink out of his lower back, flexing his toes under the back of the front seat.

Eddie stared at him sidelong, brows furrowed into that annoyed horizon line Richie had grown accustomed to looking at over the years, “What is it with you and—“

“Y-Y-Your wife,” Bill interrupted, sparing a glance in the rearview mirror, “aren’t you gonna call her?”

“Wait, you haven’t called your wife yet?” Ben piped up, looking genuinely baffled. Richie rolled his eyes, of *course* Ben wouldn’t get it. Him and Beverly were probably holding hands like a couple of middle schoolers in the backseat.

He wondered why that sent such a sting of envy coiling around his heart.

“No, okay? I can’t exactly...I can’t just call her!”

He looked down at the gold wedding band around his finger, tarnished and fading and so unlike the rest of Eddie. It looked like it was made of cheap gold—the kind you find at kiosks at the mall. As he twisted it around his finger, it slipped up past the second knuckle, turning like a gear and catching tackily along the warm skin. There wasn’t the telltale white halo of paleness lining the area where the band once sat. Richie could help but feel a kind of sick pride at that, but it was quickly squashed by the demanding, more pressing curiosity that accompanied it.

Eddie clearly took off his ring enough for it to not leave a mark—but *why*?

He didn’t strike Richie as the kind of guy to cheat—he wouldn’t dare risk it with a lumbering wife like that, but if not an affair, what else? Richie wondered offhandedly if Eddie was truly as happy in his marriage as he claimed to be, and it was then he had to look away, training his gaze on the windows of the car, and the world rolling along outside them.

They all had their secrets.

“She’d probably try to make me come home. And I— I mean, shouldn’t I take some time to heal first?”

Bev glanced at Richie, as Bill nodded his head, “Makes sense, Eddie.”

Richie didn’t miss the way he sighed, pushing the ring back over his knuckle with such conviction it would surely leave a bruise, or the way he leaned heavily into the seat, body taut and rigid like stone. But he let it go, and as Mike engaged Bill in a story about catching Mr. Keene snorting coke at the pharmacy, Richie frowned at the growing bruise on his arm and let himself drift away.

*Shortly after leaving the cafeteria, they were promptly tracked down by the resident nurse who was beginning to become somewhat of a friend. Of course, they’d only known her for three days, but she seemed to be equal parts amused as she was irked by Richie and his antics, which kind of made her one of them.*

“I don’t suppose you’re trying to leave, Mr Tozier?” she cocked her head, grinning, “You wouldn’t want to miss your shots, would you?”

“Pfft yeah, wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Richie rolled his eyes, unslinging his arm from around Eddie’s shoulder. “Wait—shots?”

“Just as a precautionary measure, Mr. Tozier. You were exposed to a lot of bacteria down there,” she pulled a face, “that place is filthy.”

“Believe me, we know,” Eddie grimaced, face looking pinched. Richie wanted to reach out to him, ask if he was okay, but then the nurse was speaking again.

“Horrible place to be, isn’t it? How did a man like you end up in a place like that, don’t tell me you went there willingly.”

“Wandered a little too far, I guess,” Eddie said quickly, and Richie couldn’t help but gape at his swift response.

Then again, they had gotten pretty good about lying after that summer— they’d turned lying into a career, turned it into a home. And as their empire of falsities grew, so too, did their capacity to construct more.

“Horrible situation, Mr Kaspbrak, I couldn’t even imagine,” she shivered, “that place gives me the creeps. I always avoided it as a girl — this may sound crazy, but I always felt as though something was watching me.”

Eddie and Richie exchanged a look, communicating in that special way they’d learned to do over the years. It was a grim smile, pained eyes, the dull tug of recognition pulling like a faint undertow.

*It was probably that avoidance , they thought, that kept the woman alive.*

Richie thought of her as a child— easy enough with her youthful face, springy dark red curls and eyes as blue as the sky. He pictured her crouched next to a sewer, reaching a tentative hand down through the grates, an inquisitive look on her face. Because there were voices in the sewers, and that's the thing about hearing voices in the dead silence: *y ou can't help but listen.*

“But enough about me,” she smiled— but it wavered as she looked between the two of them, as if picking up on the tension rolling in like a tide, casting a slight chill to the air. “Are you ready for your shots, Mr. Tozier?”

He sighed shakily, purposely ignoring Eddie's imploring gaze on the side of his face, ignoring those deep brown eyes, “Ready as I'll ever be.”

And as she smiled, opening the door, he raked a hand through his hair and grinned, flashing her a smile that didn't quite meet his eyes, “And please, call me Richie.”

---

Here's the thing: Richie wasn't scared of needles.

And he loyally stood by that point, and if need be, it would be a hill he would gladly die on, and by the way the colour was quickly draining from his face, it very well could be. And he tried telling that to Eddie, give or take a few technicalities, but there he was anyway, perched on the chair beside the table Richie sat on, looking at him like he wasn't buying it at all.

Richie was about to insist he take a hike when Eddie piped up, his perpetually irked face glaring up at Richie.

“I can’t believe you’re flirting with my nurse.”

“Can’t believe or don’t want to believe?”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Is it?” Richie asked, raising an eyebrow.

Eddie frowned. Richie shifted awkwardly, wax paper crunching beneath him and the linoleum letting out a dull thunk as his restless foot connected with the table.

“Anyway, sorry about that, Eds. Didn’t know you had dibs on her.”

Eddie scrunched up his face, looking at the wall, as if he’d rather lament to that than Richie, “*I don’t have*— don’t call me that— I don’t have dibs , asshole. I have a wife!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. We all know, Eddie— big, bitchy, kinda looks like your mom?”



“Fuck you, bro,” Eddie said, but it carried no heat. And yet, even still, it stirred something warm in the pit of Richie’s chest.

“Fuck you too, Spaghetti,” he grinned.

“For the last time, Rich, don’t ca—“

“Alright!” the nurse exclaimed, walking in, “are you ready?”

Richie looked at Eddie, who raised an eyebrow in silent question. He felt his heart jump into his throat and swallowed it with a practiced ease, grinning at her.

“You sure you don’t need me to take off my pants?”

---

The nurse did not— in fact need—or want, for that matter, Richie to take off his pants, and informed him that she had a particularly lovely girlfriend at home that would second that statement.

Nevertheless, she smiled at Richie, then at Eddie, who honestly looked kind of mortified and regarded her with what he could only describe as a *‘babies must play’* look that so often came over his face whenever the Losers took Richie, well, anywhere . She cleaned his arm with disinfectant, responding to Eddie’s hum of approval with a

small smile. Richie could only do the same. Really, it was so like Eddie to lecture doctors about proper wound treatment, and it made his heart swell to think that Eddie even cared enough to have an opinion on something as mundane as to how they give Richie a shot.

“Alright, Richie,” she said, taking a clean— and sterilized, twice , at the request of Eddie— needle and hovering it over the inside of his arm, “this is just a basic tetanus shot. We can’t really test for that, and it can’t hurt, given where you’ve been and the fact you haven’t had one since...the summer of 1989, it says here.”

“You haven’t had a tetanus shot since we were thirteen ?” Eddie admonished, looking genuinely surprised that Richie was still alive.

“Yes, Eddie, it’s not a fucking flu shot, you don’t get it every year.”

Eddie opened his mouth to say something, but he interjected, “And you don’t count because Sonia Kaspbrak was craz—ow!”

It was at that moment that the nurse found an adequate vein, the thin barb of the needle slipping smoothly under his skin with a small twinge of heat, arm going numb at the tight compression of the bandage. Richie squeezed his eyes shut, feeling a sickly heat crawl up his body. He breathed sharply through his nose, holding his arm out like a limp, detached weight as he tried to grasp onto something solid in the fog of his mind.

And then someone was gripping his knee.

He forced his eyes open— or one of them at least, and stared at the wide-eyes expression of Eddie, following his gaze down to where his hand was resting comfortably against his lower thigh. His grip was strong, sure— *grounding*. And it was all Richie needed to come out of that sickly feverish haze and into a more familiar one, where all that existed was Eddie, and all he could feel was love. He opened his mouth to say something, but then the nurse was retracting the needle with a satisfied grin, unwrapping the compression band and cleaning the wound before bandaging it snugly and slipping the syringe into a little baggie.

“Well, you’re all done. We’re just gonna check your vitals real quick and then we can give Eddie a look-over before we send you on your way.”

Richie hardly heard her, paralyzed staring at the spot where Eddie’s hand still lingered, thumb brushing absentmindedly over the knee of his jeans. As if on cue, Eddie realized what he was doing, retracting his hand with a slight blush.

The nurse placed a stethoscope at the small of his back. “Breathe in for me, Richie,” she instructed as Richie forced in a shaky inhale, “and out.”

She moved the cool metal up between his shoulder blades, and then placed it right over his heart.

“Your hair,” Eddie said suddenly, smiling a bit wryly.

“What about my hair?” Richie managed to choke out, still feeling the

ghost of his touch on his thigh where Eddie's palm had been moments earlier.

*Jesus Christ, Eds, are you trying to kill me?"*

Apparently, he was, because he leaned over, brushing a stray curl off his forehead, to no avail as it fell right back into place. "It looks really stupid."

And of course, because God hates Richie, the nurse pulled her stethoscope away and said, "Well, your vitals look good, but your heart is beating awfully fast. Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

---

Richie didn't have much time to dwell on that moment of embarrassment in the humiliation mausoleum that was his life because it was drowned out by the more pressing though that Eddie needed him.

He should have remembered— should have known. Eddie had always hated needles as a kid, bursting into tears on one, (unfortunately), memorable occasion as he told the Losers he was due for a tetanus shot. Richie remembered awkwardly standing there as the rest of the Losers furiously tried to console him, and he wasn't much more of a help now as Eddie squeezed his hand in a death-grip, knuckles going white as he forced his eyes shut.

"Jeez, Eds, you're like a woman in labour," Richie cracked nervously,

feeling his fingers go numb under Eddie's hold. The pressure sent a dull jolt of pain through his own heavy arm, but he didn't dare let go.

"I swear to God, Richie, I will kill you if you don't shut up right now," Eddie managed, not even bothering to reprimand him for the nickname, face paling as he bit his lip.

"Well this time I'm actually scared of your death threats because they have step-stools here and now you could actually reach my neck."

Eddie shook his head, and Richie guessed he would be rolling his eyes if they weren't already firmly screwed shut.

"Beep beep, Richie," he muttered, but he didn't miss the way Eddie held on tighter.

Swallowing thickly, Richie squeezed back and tried not to think about what a loss it would be when Eddie finally came to his senses and decided to let go.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This was actually a part of a longer chapter that I broke into two just for better scheduling, so the next part will be out on Thursday, and it only gets more Reddie-intensive, so rest assured, I will be delivering that sweet, sweet fan service. Also Nurse Joyce is our #1 lesbian icon, I'm glad you guys are liking her.

And, as always, feel free to leave a comment below and request something you'd like to see in my story, I'm always looking to please ;)

## 27. Chapter Twenty Seven

### Notes for the Chapter:

Can you believe I had most of this sitting in my notes all week and didn't post it sooner? I've been absolutely loaded with homework the past few weeks, it's insane. I just finished a 4 foot tall painting for my art class and I've never been more relieved. Anywho, enjoy this 4.5k chapter, and I'll do my absolute best to post these updates as frequently as possible. <3

The rest, as promised by their well-meaning nurse, who's name—as it turned out, was Joyce—promised.

They had sat in a waiting room after, Eddie frowning as he scrolled through a seemingly endless inbox of emails— each one looking more deathly boring than the last, while Richie played phone-tag with the Losers, trying to arrange plans to be picked up. It was only thirty minutes later before they were being called back into the room, given clean bills of health and a stack of instructions as wide and endless as the space Richie was currently trying to force between them.

“You’re like a robot now, dude. Then when you malfunction in a week, I’ll see if we can trade you in for a newer model.”

Eddie rolled his eyes, taking the pamphlets with an appreciative glance at the nurse, “Does your model come with better jokes or just a new hairline?”

“Yowza!” Richie whistled, clapping him on the back, carefully avoiding any sore areas, “You wound me, Spaghetti.

“Ignore him, he’s an idiot,” Eddie explained to Joyce, making his way towards the door.

“The hits just keep on coming. Prison changed you, Eds,” Richie said as morosely as he could manage, watching him slip into the corridor and lazily following.

Joyce stopped him, smiling, “I trust you’ll take good care of him. Be sure he recovers well, and don’t hesitate to call if anything comes up.”

Richie nodded, trying not to linger on the fact she assumed he would mainly be taking care of Eddie, or what that might insinuate — or even the pressing internal question *if* he would end up doing that.

“And,” she added, looking thoughtful as she placed a friendly hand on his shoulder, “good luck.”

And then, with a wink, she was gone, leaving Richie, once again, wondering what the hell *that* was supposed to mean.

---

Richie was roused from his daydreams when Bill pulled up the familiar driveway of his childhood home— white-grey and peeling like an onion— or maybe a scab.

It was no coincidence when Richie, in turn, felt his eyes begin to water.

He stepped out of the car, making no move or offer to grab any of the pizza boxes, striding ahead onto his porch, where his mother's old wicker chair still sat nestled under the trellis. He dimly noted the cigarette burn mark etched into the side of the house where he had stubbed it out days before.

*"Every second we're not all together again is another second he's down there alone."*

He shivered, pulling his face into a painful grin. He spread his arms wide, turning around pointedly, "Well? Take it all in. Welcome to the Tozier abode!"

Bill, carrying three of the pizza boxes, shook his head, pushing past him and through the front door. Mike paused at the bottom of the steps and looked up contemplatively.

"Nice place, Richie," he said kindly.

The next voice wasn't so gracious.

"I cannot *believe* the state you keep this place in!" Eddie admonished, picking up a stray beer can, half-crushed and tacky with old liquor



around the rim. “You stay here for what, two weeks and you *already* destroy it?”

“Three weeks,” Richie corrected tersely. *And nearly five days*, he finished in his mind, feeling his stomach constrict uncomfortably.

“Well, I for one, love it,” Beverly smiled, patting him on the shoulder as she started to follow Bill into the house, “it looks very...Richie.”

“Your house always had beautiful architecture,” Ben offered, looking up at the white exterior, which too, was beginning to peel.

“Alright, get in here, Losers, I’m starving!” Bill called from inside.

And they followed, because when Big Bill says something, you listen.

---

After a few distasteful comments from Eddie about the state of Richie’s house, they sat around the dinner table, tucking into five boxes of pizza and the better half of Richie’s alcohol cabinet

“All I’m saying is that it would be nice to have a happy ending in one of your stories,” Beverly said, pointing an accusatory slice of cheese pizza at Bill.

“It’s not my fault!” he deflected, taking a sip of beer, “They just...end up with dark endings. And my manager—“

“—*Wants you to write better endings*, yeah, we know,” Richie finished, turning to Eddie.

“Hey, you doing alright?”

His appetite seemed to be good— and he couldn’t tell if that was surprising or not, given the weird mix of events that had transpired over the past few days. There comes a very specific point in absurdity where no natural reasoning of logic applies, and Richie was staring dumbfounded at the precipice of it.

“I’m eating actual food for the first time in weeks, what do you think, dickhead?”

But there was a smile in those words, and that was enough to still Richie’s nerves for a moment, emboldened enough by the slow drip of alcohol through his veins to stare a little longer at Eddie. And maybe it was that that encouraged him to open his mouth.

“Hey, Eds—“

“There is no way you could outdrink me!” Beverly suddenly piped up, loud and a little loose from the wine she had been nursing for the past half hour.

“Oh y-y-yeah?” Bill challenged, leaning forward over the table.

“Yeah! Don’t even try to challenge Ben though, he prefers those fruity little wines, can you believe it?”

The group erupted into drunken cheers, broken up by the unheard voice of Ben interjecting, “I can totally drink, she’s lying!”

“Oh yeah? Prove it, Benny.”

“You’re on, Mikey.”

“Okay, Beverly said, giggling as she leaned over the table, hands cupping the neck of the wine glass, where a purple-red drop was careening down the surface, “but I wanna challenge Richie. He used to be able to outdrink all of us!”

Richie shrugged, remembering the time they had snuck a six pack and a few cheap bottles of wine out of their parents’ stash, getting drunk in the clubhouse. Or in Ben and Richie’s case— sick.

Eddie pulled a face, “Ugh. I remember that. You got hammered and then upchucked into the weeds.”

“*After*,” Richie clarified, “the rest of the Losers were already gone.”

“I know,” he grimaced, “but I saw. It was disgusting— you just hurled right into the Barrens. We spent the whole summer down there, Richie!”

“Alright, fine, Eds. You’re just mad because I almost ralphed on your little white sneakers.”

“My mom would have killed me!” he protested, voice sounding as shrill as it had when they were kids, and for a moment, it was like Richie was thirteen again, getting yelled at by Eddie for getting drunk.

*“So irresponsible, Richie. This is why my mom doesn’t let me fucking hang out with you, I can’t believe you—“*

An amused grin crawled up Richie’s face, and with it, horrifyingly, a twinge of aching fondness.

“Alright,” he said, swallowing, “let’s get wasted.”

---

The Losers were sprawled haphazardly across Richie’s living room floor like discarded children’s toys, all ragdoll limbs and drooping eyes, the slow buzz of alcohol easing them into drowsy slumber.

Richie, however, was wide awake.

Eddie was passed out on the couch beside him, knees drawn up to his chest and a pillow tucked firmly under his chin, arms wound tightly around it. Pale moonlight cast in through the windows, sending a streak of whiteness over his eyelid in an almost Bowie-like fashion. His lip twitched, as if he was chewing out Richie in his sleep. That, paired with the way his hair was falling softly against his face without the strict constraint of gel was enough to instil Richie with the desperate need to get up, to gather whatever semblance of his own sanity he had left before he lost it gazing at the face of the man he loved, but very well could never have.

He carefully extracted himself from the tangle of limbs, the assault of hands as Beverly's arm slung over his own, the other pressed to her forehead like a fainting maiden, fiery hair fanning out onto the pillow behind her, as if she was falling.

He quietly slid open the sliding glass door of the back porch, slipping out into the cool night and fumbling for a cigarette.

Sure enough, the lighter was tucked snugly against his side, along with a few loose in his pocket. He brought both up to his mouth, letting the paper wet in the corner of his mouth as he cupped a hand around the end, sparking a small blue flame. A shaky breath was not so much deflated, as it had been *ripped* out of Richie's chest, sending a splutter of ash grey smoke winding up towards the sky, a dull, hacking cough leaving his throat as a white cloud poured out between his trembling lips. His hand quivered, and he raked it through his hair, disturbing several strands that had been plastered to his forehead with sweat. The night was cool— a slight breeze to the air that made Richie briefly consider going inside for a jacket.

He hadn't quite decided yet when he heard the sound of the door sliding open, quiet footfalls behind him, and a voice he would recognize any day.

"Those things are gonna kill ya, Rich," Eddie chastened him softly, sidling up next to him.

Richie let out a shallow breath, lungs burning slightly from the cool air and the scratchiness crawling up his throat as he realized: here Eddie was, standing on his back porch in pyjamas far too big for him — *Richie's* pyjamas, with a tired smile on his face as he said the words Richie had been longing to hear for the past month. He was right there, where Richie had been longing him to be ever since he took his last shuddering breath, and he couldn't even bring himself to tell Eddie how he feels.

He huffed out something like a laugh, smoke wisping over his lips as he brought the smoldering cigarette down to his side, tilting his head towards the sky.

"I think I'll take my chances."

"Yeah, well, if you keep being an idiot, I might get to you before the lung cancer does."

"Like I said," Richie continued, casting him a sidelong glance and a grin, letting his eyes fall upon Eddie for the first time since he'd stepped outside. "I'll take my chances."

“*God*, you’re annoying,” he huffed in response, “I almost forgot how annoying you were.”

“Awe, Eds, you sure know how to make a girl blush.”

“Shut up, Richie. Hand me that cigarette.”

Maybe it was the forceful tone of his voice, the tremble in his hands, or the overwhelming reality that Eddie was here and bitching at him like nothing had changed— and yet, there was a certain air to the night that made him believe everything had. Regardless, he found himself handing Eddie the cigarette, which he took with a flourish, shaking his head as he brought it up to his lips, “And don’t call me Eds.”

Richie was transfixed— almost paralyzed in the way pure white billowed through his parted lips as they twisted into a disapproving frown, eyebrows knitting together. Here he was, muttering the same words that he had been saying since they were thirteen and Richie had taken a niche liking to driving Eddie up the wall, or more specifically, just Eddie in *general*. Here he was, every bit the same person Richie had fallen in love with the summer of 1989—only he was different, too. *Stronger*. Yes, even with a gaping hole through his chest, Eddie was stronger than he’d ever been, looking over the blurry end of the horizon with a look of steely determination Richie’d never fully seen.

Sandbox love never dies, and the warmth spreading across his chest as he watched Eddie exist in the same space as him, breathe the same air— proved that to be true. But apparently, along with it, neither did

the brimming curiosity that tugged at Richie's gut whenever Eddie's shorts hiked up a little too high up the pale expanse of his thighs, or now, as he watched that familiar mantra of, '*shut up, Richie* ,' ghost over his lips, smoke escaping like the phantom itself, leaving Richie frozen within his own skin.

It was a lot to take in.

So, Richie said nothing as he accepted the cigarette Eddie handed back, letting out a dry cough as he did. Shakily, he brought it to his own lips again.

*"That's basically an indirect kiss,"* the words he blurted out to Eddie one confused, hazy summer rang in his mind.

Shivering, he tugged his arms tighter around himself—where goosebumps had begun to form, and pushed the thought away. But like a corpse rousing from its eternal sleep as someone walks over its grave, or like the ache in your knees just before it rains, Eddie caught on to Richie's train of thought, even as it departed.

"God, we haven't done this forever," he huffed, which sounded something like a laugh. "It's been, what..."

"Almost twenty seven years," Richie offered, blowing a plume of smoke absentmindedly into the sky.

"Yeah," Eddie shivered, hugging his arms close to his chest. "I still



hate those things.”

He dipped his head closer to his shirt's neckline and distantly, Richie wondered if he was cold, or just shell-shocked at the jarring familiarity. Eddie had always been cold, prompting many internal struggles as Richie fought the almost overwhelming urge to offer up his jacket. But he had never quite found the right moment to, and now, bare-armed in the coolness of the night, his heart a throbbing ache in his chest, he had nothing to offer but a longing gaze and so many unsaid words left to die on his tongue. Richie wondered what it would feel like to hold him, feel his cold nose brush against the junction of his neck and shoulder, small hands gripping the back of his shirt as fiercely as they had the day Richie left. What it would feel like to hold him back even tighter, to fist a hand through his hair and whisper the promise he had always meant to keep:

*"I'll never let you go again, Eds."*

He wondered, not for the first time, and not for the last, what it would feel like to feel that steady, warm pulse thrum beneath his skin, feel his sweet breath fan over his cheek as he heard the soft, blessed inhales as Eddie lived and breathed in his space.

That's all he'd ever wanted.

There, in that hazy warmth of knowing, Richie came to one of life's greatest truths. It was never the fear of finding something worth holding onto, he thought, that frightened people. But rather, the overlooming threat of eventually having to let go, and how you would survive without it. Richie took another drag, teeth wearing indents into the pliant paper— a nervous habit of his, usually making an appearance as a kid when he got too high and had desperately,

(and often fruitlessly), trying to quell his shaky paranoia with a smoke.

If Eddie noticed, he didn't say a word. He just laughed— cutting clear and loud into the dead silence of the night.

“Do you— oh *God*. Do you remember that time as kids when my mom almost caught us smoking?”

Inadvertently, Richie found a smile rising to his own face, and with it, a laugh of his own that tumbled out of his mouth clumsily, mindlessly, more easily than Richie could remember in the past twenty seven years.

“Oh, how could I forget? It was—

*—a clear summer night, just one year after the June of 1989.*

The Losers Club had mostly disbanded by that point; Beverly going to live with an aunt out of state, Ben preoccupied with his architecture program and the deep loss of his first love, Mike busy as ever on the farm. It was just the original four now, just as it had begun, though Bill's parents would drag him out of Derry not a year later, a shaken Stan following close in tow. But for that moment, things were exactly as they started, and exactly where they were always meant to end; with Richie and Eddie, and the eternal underlying promise of *RichieAndEddie* .

And for that moment, as Richie climbed in through Eddie's window, that had been enough.

"Hiya, Eds," he grinned, mouth quirking up as Eddie's eyes bulged out of his head, the flat of his palm pressed flush against his chest, where— if the rising blush to his face was any indication, his heart was racing under his skin.

"*Jesus!*" he gasped quietly, casting a nervous glance at his closed bedroom door, and they paused for a moment, listening for the telltale sound of an estranged Sonia Kaspbrak rushing to the aid of her son in light of fabricated danger, the likes of which only she could understand.

When their ears fell on silence, Eddie breathed a sigh of relief and continued.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Rich?" he hissed, glaring up at him with crossed arms and a stubborn pout, which— *fuck*, Richie would never admit, was *cute*.

*Cute, cute, cute!*

"Well, actually, I came for your mom—" Richie started, pushing his glasses up with his knuckle, only to be shoved back towards the window by Eddie's hands.

"Okay, bye Richie—"

“Eds, wait, wait!” he protested, gripping his shoulders, where Eddie’s hands were firmly planted as he drove Richie back across the carpet.

He tried not to blush as he fingers closed around Eddie’s knuckles, and channelled the fluttery feeling spreading inside his heart into a boisterous grin, wiggling his eyebrows.

“I come in peace. And,” he said, reaching into his pocket, “with gifts.”

Eddie watched him silently as he pulled a cigarette from his pocket, holding it up between them with a triumphant grin as Eddie released him, fumbling for a lighter, flicking the metal cap.

“Really?” he bitched, voice shrill and whiny, “You came here just to smoke?”

He tried to come across as displeased, but Richie didn’t miss the way his eyes zeroed in on the drag, and it sent a coil of heat through his lower stomach as he imagined that Eddie was staring at his lips, and not the cigarette nursed between them.

“Not just for that,” Richie said, focusing his attention on lighting the butt. It was always easier to be honest when his eyes were anywhere else but Eddie. “I can’t just want to hang out with my little Eddie Spaghetti?”

Eddie looked pleased, almost preening at the suggested praise. “Don’t call me that,” he said, but moved to sit next to Richie on the windowsill.

“You love it,” Richie grinned around a cloud of smoke, eyes drooping behind those stupid coke-bottle glasses, “you hardly even acknowledged when I called you ‘Eds.’ I think you’re going soft on me.”

“You wish,” Eddie scoffed, watching the orange spark at the smoldering end of the cigarette, almost transfixed.

“You want a drag?” Richie offered suddenly, the proposition so absurd without context. Eddie was a hypochondriac— an *asthmatic* hypochondriac at that.

A mama’s boy with no semblance of rebellion on his horizon before a year ago. Eddie wore the frail and unsteady skin of someone who was only now just beginning to realize his own autonomy, and wasn’t quite sure what to do with it. Richie didn’t know what was more ridiculous; the fact he even asked in the first place, or the fact Eddie actually *agreed*.

“Fine,” he huffed, almost like a whisper, and it was Richie’s turn to have bulging eyes.

“Are you serious? Eddie—“

"I said," he huffed, leaning half into Richie's lap to snag it from his hand, settling back down with his back against the smooth white sill, "give it. God, you're so annoying sometimes."

And as Richie watched him bring the cigarette to his lips in the spot where Richie's mouth had been moments before, clean little hands wrapping around the paper as he took an indignant huff, he felt the Earth come to a jarring halt on its axis.

*Jesus Christ.*

And then Eddie was spluttering, face twisted into disgust, all but shoving the drag back into Richie's hands as he laughed silently, revelling the quiet fuming of the small boy beside him.

"Oh, *Eds* ," he started, voice dripping with amusement.

"*Don't*," he spoke tersely, biting at his bottom lip.

"That was adorable," he crooned, leaning over to pinch his cheek, "*cute, cute, cute!*"

"Richie! Get off of me!" he protested, and Richie would have, really, had Eddie not said that to begin with.

But now that the idea was planted into his head, it ran wild in his mind and crossed the barrier over to his limbs as he rolled atop of

Eddie, pinning his arms down to the carpeted floor, grinning down at him.

“Oh my God, you’re so annoying, I hate you and your stupid shitty cigarettes and—“

He cut himself off as Richie leaned forward, down and into his space, jet black hair brushing over his forehead as Richie brought their faces mere inches apart.

“Richie—“ he started, wide-eyed and unmoving, eyes flicking an erratic path from his eyes to his lips, which, fuck — Richie would definitely be thinking about later.

And then he was lining up their lips, just short of two inches from touching, and blowing a thick cloud of smoke into Eddie’s mouth. Eddie watched through hazed eyes as Richie yawned the white rivulets of ash between his lips, looking stunned. And then he was inhaling, softly, tentatively, and Richie was pulling away, just a little, and his grip loosened on Eddie’s wrists.

“*Richie—*“ he breathed, pupils blown out and unfocused as they flitted between Richie’s own and his lips.

And then there were distant heavy footsteps, and the shrill call of, “*Eddie-Bear, is that you?*”

And just like that, Eddie was up, pushing Richie off of him and

towards the window with impressive force, Richie stumbling towards the open sill and gripping it as he swung a leg over, grinning at Eddie.

“Richie! *Go !*” he hissed, looking back frantically at his door.

And then Richie was hauling himself over and onto the roof, ducking along the side of the house just as Sonia opened Eddie’s door. He slid down towards the eaves, pulling himself over the edge of the squat house and clambering down into the grass. And then he just lay there in the cold, dewy lawn, scratchy against his bare arms, where week-old scabs were still healing behind Band-Aids Eddie meticulously plastered across his skin— and he *laughed* . Mindlessly and a bit hysterically, he laughed, body wracked by trembles as the seamless beginnings and ends of euphoria crawled up his chest, burning his cheeks and aching his jaw as he laid in the grass and the dead centre of his youth— the childhood that built him, and the future that would drag him endlessly away.

Richie had murmured, there in that moment, sprawled across Sonia Kaspbrak’s lawn, for the first time, “I love him,” he let his cheek press against the grass, felt the dew brush against his ear. “I love him. God help me, I *love* him.”

And then he was laughing again, pulling himself up as Sonia’s slippered feet thundered towards the back door. And Richie was running down the sprawling streets of Derry, a distinct, youthful burn in his lungs and exhilarated tears pricking in his eyes.

*The next day, Eddie had approached him at school, eyebrows drawn and face a little flushed as he squeaked, “My mom was so—*



—mad,” Eddie huffed, crossing his arms as the memory flooded back, Richie narrating it perfectly, (minus a few little details that Eddie didn’t need to remember).

“Of course she was, finding her little Eddie-Bear playing hockey tonsil with the Devil.”

“We were *not* playing hockey ton—“ Eddie started, rolling his eyes, before coming to a halting stop, face flushing in the pale moonlight, “oh, you meant the cigarette.”

Richie just laughed because *what the fuck, was Eddie trying to kill him?* And he let the moment pass, stalking a path outwards until it disappeared, like clouds rolling over the horizon.

“God, that was hilarious. Your mom hated me.”

“It was *so* not funny,” Eddie protested, crossing his arms and glaring at him.

“Oh it *so* was ,” Richie insisted, quirking a brow.

Eddie just rolled his eyes, letting his shoulders slump in some kind of defeat. And then he was touching Richie’s shoulder, hand lingering for a moment, breath fanning over Richie’s neck.

“Goodnight, Rich,” he said softly.

And then he turned on his heel, softly sliding the door open and closing it behind him, leaving Richie alone on the back porch. He took in a shaky breath, watching the still inky darkness melt into the horizon of trees. For a few minutes, he just stood, overwhelmed with a kind of fuzzy warmth that spread from his cheeks to his toes. He was roused out of that comfortable oblivion, however, when he heard a distant yell, seemingly coming from the Canal. Almost as if someone was in there, trapped.

*Waiting .*

He froze, keeping a steely gaze on the unmoving horizon, a sickly heat crashing over him in a stifling wave. But the sound was gone, replaced by the distant brush of wind rustling through the trees.

“Jesus, I really need to get some sleep,” he muttered.

And then he was stubbing out his cigarette, sliding open the screen door. Taking one last look over the horizon, he shook his head, crawling back to his spot on the floor. Above him, Eddie snored softly.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Richie forced himself into a restless sleep.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Stan the Mannnnnn,,,, how we miss you so. Thoughts? Feelings? Feel free to yell at me in the comments, I love it, you funky little reddie stans.

Also- tumblr has groupchats now! I'm actually in a few- 'the losers be on vacation' and 'reddie gays.' and started my own groupchat called 'Eddie (Since You've Been Gone).' You can find it on tumblr, feel free to join! We can talk about the story, you can ask me anything, ask for writing advice, share your fics with me, talk about reddie, anything you want! Let me know in the comments if you're interested in joining, I can also add you if you drop your tumblr username. :D

Love you guys, and can't wait to see you in the groupchat ;)

## 28. Chapter Twenty Eight

When Stanley Uris woke up, the first thing he noticed, was that it was dark.

The darkness was almost overwhelming, outreaching the blurry bounds of those four walls like the twisted shadow of a barren tree on cold, dead, frozen ground. It ebbed and flowed and spilled over into the dim hallway like an overturned bottle of ink, or an oil barrel bleeding into the ocean's waves. It spread like a mold, or some kind of dank rot. The rot, as it turns out, was ever-so-present too, clinging to the walls and vomiting across the linoleum floor in between grooves of grout, separating cracked bath tiles, glue that held them together tacky with age. Through the shrill ringing in his ears, he was able to make out a faint gargling sound, like a broken pipe belching up sewage. Fitting, because that's exactly what it was.

The water in his bath turned a stomach-churning grey as the drain moaned, spluttering congealed bits of grime and blood and whatever remains in backed-up water pipes, into the tub, painting the smooth marble walls with a layer of muck. The water lapped at his thighs, his arms once, twice, sickly warm contents burning his pale skin, sending a hot, feverish sheen of sweat across his chest, where, underneath, his heart gave one weak twitch before bursting alive behind his ribs.

Stanley opened up his mouth, and began to scream.

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When he finally managed to pull himself from the slick tub, he was trembling, his body one giant goosebump as he shakily reached for

the white towel slung over the lip of the bath, holding it over him with a rigid grip. His jaw was locked and aching like a creaky vise, small whimpers escaping it with each painful step forward.

He braced himself against the countertop, staring at that reflection, unreconcilable with himself, with that pallid face, those dark bruises lining his eyes, the thick layer of grime coating his skin. His stomach lurched like a car coming to a screeching halt, and along with it, a fuzzy dizziness as he gagged dryly into the ceramic bowl of the sink. Spluttering out some kind of black goo, he fisted a hand across his mouth, staggering towards the door, slightly ajar and rusted at the hinges. Behind him, a rat scurried out from under a cabinet, disappearing into some hole in the wall behind the toilet. He had only made it three steps beyond the doorjamb when it happened. With a child's eye of devotion and its slightly skewed axis of importance, he noticed the man before the room.

The face that bore down on his own was stern. Severe. Drawn tight like the angry hand of an artist, like violent red streaks painted across a canvas with a flourish, or like curtains drawn hastily closed, like a man shutting out the world. It held the tight-lipped expression of a man unsatisfied with life's way of tiptoeing around the rather rigid commandments he attempted to implement.

*Don't you know, Stanley wanted to ask, haven't you learned?*

*The world doesn't listen, Stanley learned for the first time when he looked into those cold, dead, white eyes of the woman in the painting as she rose above him like a spider trailing its prey. There are rules that can be broken, and they break all the time. The world is dirty, and you can never quite rid of the blood on your hands— shrug off the shadows that envelope you in the night. Every night, you slip into your pressed white sheets in your silken pyjamas and hug a pillow to your*

chest that smells faintly of flowers, and you hug your mother and bury your face in her breasts and feel her soft hair graze your cheek, and you hold your Torah to your chest and recite words like they mean anything, but in the end, you are still coming home to a bed of lies.

*The world doesn't listen*, Stanley realized with an unbridled horror as the woman in the painting gained on him, curling around his body with some kind of serpentine gauntness, grinning all the same. As if she couldn't see the hollows of her cheeks, as if she didn't know she was a blatant offence to every law that governed Stanley's world.

*The world does listen*, he realized with some kind of sickening terror. The revelation creeped in with a sickly warmth, like the cool, clammy grip of a nightmare not yet put to rest. It dawned on him as he felt the grime cling to his skin beneath his shirt cuffs, the David star blinking accusatorily at him between the man's chest. Perhaps Stanley best understood that twenty seven years ago, a just-barely-twelve-year-old faced with a monster so grotesque, so unnatural, that it would haunt him for the rest of his trepid life. The world listens , and that should scare you the most. No evil arises from complete oblivion, Stanley thought, call it baser nature or whatever you want, but there is considerable intelligence in knowing the shadows that most desperately call to people.

*And how can a person go on knowing that?*

The face sighed at him, twitched where he saw his hands quiver at the hem of the bath towel drawn tightly around his chest.

"You're late, Stanley," he disgraced through pursed lips, shoving a pressed linen suit into his arms.

Atop the bundle of fabric sat a navy blue yarmulke, white star of David glaring up at him imploringly.

“Put this on,” he ordered, eyes cold as steel as he turned away. He paused in the corridor, pivoting on his heel, the sound deafening against the hardwood floors.

*“How is it going to look? The rabbi’s son, late to his own Bat Mitzvah.”*

Letting out a ragged, hushed breath, Stanley shakily let the towel drop, pulling on the linen suit as the sound of his father’s footsteps disappeared down the hall.

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He walked down the dim corridor, pale light filtering in through large stained glass windows at the height of the ceiling. The shadows lurched at him, like the cold, searing grip of fear. On the wall, the Modigliani painting bore down at him through the pure whites of her eyes, smile crooked and wrong.

His hands trembled where they hung at his sides, “I’m not fucking scared of you,” he choked out.

The woman in the painting just smiled, and like sunlight hitting the winter snow, something seemed to glimmer behind that blank, pale stare. Jagged teeth gleamed, like semblances of the white-picket

fence life Stan was deprived of from the moment he saw her horrid face and for the first time in his life, swallowed the bitter medicine of pure, unadulterated fear. Stanley Uris's childhood ended with her, some remnants of it still swimming in that dead stare, twinkling like fresh tears pooling in a child's eyes, or like a dying star billions of lightyears away. And now, Stanley knew, it was time to put it to rest.

Taking a shaky breath and prying his eyes from the painting, he took a step forward, and moved on.

The hall, as it turned out just lead to another room. The tunnels of the sewers were serpentine, winding and twisting senselessly, it hurt Stanley's already pounding head to try and decipher it, so he didn't, turning to the chestnut door in front of him.

*Maybe somethings are better off not known.*

Hanging off the marbled would set a small marquee sign:

*"STANLEY URIS: 10 AM "*

With trembling hands and a fresh sore but in inches lower lip, where his teeth were worrying at it listlessly, he took a shuddering breath, and walked through the door, instantly greeted by the bassy sound of organ music, and a startlingly familiar voice.

*"Bar'chu et— A—Adonai...ham'vorach. Baruch...Adonai ham-vorach l'olam..."*



“—*Va-ed. Baruch atah, Adonai*,” his father finished, staring sternly down at him from where he was situated amongst the balcony, “You’re not studying, Stanley. How’s it going to look? The rabbi’s son can’t finish his own Torah reading.”

Stanley watched the young boy stare down at his Torah— flipped comically upside down, like a indication of what was to come; how his life would pivot to a dizzying halt at that very moment. He watched, and he stayed quiet.

“Take the book to my office, you’re obviously not using it.”

And just like that, like a child burned from the hot stroke of a palm coming across his face, or startled by the blisters bubbling up to the surface of his wrists, where a belt had been moments before, Stanley felt himself leap out of the pew he was seated in, only to be stopped by a sharp hand.

“No,” the voice said simply, and Stan’s breath all but left his lungs, punched out of him in shuddering, ragged breaths, a fire burning in his nose and crawling up his throat. The smile was imploring, hypnotizing.

*Like he could tell anyone to do anything, and they would just follow,* Eddie’s words rung in his ears, just as clear as they had been all those years ago, huddled in the Barrens. *What kind of power was that?*

“Bill,” he breathed, hating how it sounded more like a sob.

“D-D-Don’t, Stanley.”

The last two syllables were breathed in almost a whisper, like he was going to fade, like tumbleweeds blown away by a hot breeze. *Don’t go*, Stanley almost said, and then the voice got louder, clearer, and as he stared into the eyes of that boy helplessly uncovered from his past, he found himself wishing that he would. But that’s the thing— you can’t half-wish for someone’s presence. You’ll only be left with a fragmented illusion of whatever they were, never fully there. And like glass shattering into a million pieces, sometimes those fragments cut.

“D-Don’t go, S-S-Stan,” his eyes deepening the way they had that day in the Barrens, right before he took a jagged piece of glass to his palm.

*"S-S-Swear on it."*

Stanley knew as he crumpled under that gaze, that he was making another promise, as silent as it was. Stan’s will went quietly into the night, but it never walked alone.

“You can’t c-c-change it,” he said softly.

He watched his younger self grip the Torah in sweaty palms, stepping guiltily off the pedestal, out of the spotlight, and slip into his father’s dark office, where he knew, just moments later, his life would have been changed forever. *Don’t go*, he wanted to plead, *keep your Torah*,

*read it well. Study it, memorize it, beg to leave town, whatever it takes. But don't let yourself see what you can never unsee, don't let anything change.*

But it was too late, and as he disappeared from sight, the organ music began once again, and he was being urged out of his pew.

“Well, g-g-go on. S-S-Stan,” Bill said, pushing him upright, “we’ve all been w-w-waiting.”

Sure enough, amongst the cold expressions spotted in the pews, sat all of the Losers, on opposite sides with only a few feet between them, but seemingly miles apart. The cool rift was palpable in the air, and they all stared blankly at him, like they weren’t entirely there.

“Come on, Stanley,” his father said as he stepped up to the podium, Torah nestled on a small brown table, “read your Torah for everyone. Go on.”

His eyes were black, dripping with some kind of goo, similar to the one Eddie had spat out at the Neibolt house as kids, like some kind of raw sewage, or liquid tar. It dripped from his lips, running down his chin and staining a small circle of grey into his cotton dress shirt. Stanley watched the room, those yellow lights and high ceilings, those blank eyes boring a hole into his soul. With trembling hands, he gripped the cool metal of the microphone as it let out a shrill squawk, looking over the mahogany banister and at the row of people watching him. He fumbled with the Torah, reading that old scripture through the terrified eyes of someone who didn’t quite know how to go back to what he once called home.

And then he met a set of eyes, right in the back row. The only ones hidden behind spectacles, black-rimmed and comically large, those blue eyes peering up at him, seeming to twinkle, though it could have just been the light winking off his glasses frames.

*"Knock 'em dead, Stan the Man,"* he mouthed, grinning.

And that was all Stan needed before he was continuing, closing the Torah with a deafening, guilty *thud*, the sound echoing off the beams of the room.

"Today," he breathed, voice shaky as the ground below him. He gripped the microphone tighter, "I'm supposed to become a man."

He looked over at Richie, who was beaming, sending vigorous thumbs up. Eddie, who was sitting just one pew over, seemed to be looking at him fondly, there was no doubt about it. And then he turned to Stan with a small smile, and it got a little easier for the next words to leave his mouth.

"It's funny though. Everyone, I think, has some memories they're prouder of than others, right? And, maybe that's why change is so scary. 'Cause the things we wish we could leave behind, the whispers we wish we could silence...t he nightmares we most wanna wake up from..."

Memories of Bill collapsed in the sewers, Georgie's raincoat clutched to his chest, flooded his mind. He could almost feel the cool press of tears against his cheek, and maybe, he thought distantly, they were his own.

“The memories we wish we could change...”

He turned to Bill, looking into those green eyes. *How many times had their attempts to reach out fell short? How many times had forces been driven between them, forces they still ceased to understand?*

“The secrets we feel like we have to keep,” he continued, looking over at Richie, who was watching the side of Eddie’s face with a kind of painful longing he couldn’t help but understand, “...are the hardest to walk away from.”

“The good stuff...the pictures in our mind that fade away the fastest. Those pieces of you feel the easiest to lose. Maybe I don’t want to forget. Maybe if that’s what today’s all about—“ he locked eyes with Bill, who smiled reassuringly, “forget it, right?”

He looked out into the crowd, jaw set, taking a deep breath, eyes steelier than they had ever been. He’d never known bravery until he was forced to confront it in the face, and now it was all about to come tumbling out— logic and order be damned. He was going to say the words he’d never gotten to say, even if it trembled the ground beneath his feet and crumbled the fragile walls shielding him from that haunting unknown.

“I know I’m a Loser. And no matter what,” he looked at Richie, “*I always fucking will be.*”

Dropping the microphone, the last thing Stanley heard was the

deafening screech of feedback, and his own startled cry as something emerged from the shadows, towering over him. Like a man in prayer, Stanley keeled over onto his knees.

And then the world went black.

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Eddie awoke with a gasp, a bone-deep coldness seeping through his veins— the heady drip of fear. The movement startled Richie, who was sitting propped up against the coffee table, looking rather flushed.

“Guys,” he breathed, rousing the attention of the other Losers, who had just begun to stir.

He looked up at Richie, face solemn and troubled as ever.

*“I think Stan is alive.”*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hi guys! Sorry for the late update, I've had NO free time lately with school and it absolutely sucks. I had a bit of trouble with this chapter, it's a new P.O.V. so it takes a bit to try to perfect it. I'm not sure if it sounds in character for Stan, so let me know! I really hope I did his character justice, I love him so much. Also I am not Jewish, so forgive me if the synagogue

scene wasn't accurate. I found it interesting to explore because I watched a video that revealed that the words Stanley was fumbling over in It Chapter One was just the first words you need to recite before opening the Torah, giving some insight into how much Stanley truly struggles with his faith, ESPECIALLY after Pennywise.

Anyways, leave me a comment if you'd like, and if you want to talk to me about this chapyter, this fic, or reddie is general, come find me over at @pastel-reddie on tumblr! :D

## 29. Chapter Twenty Nine

### Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, it feels so good to update! I know I say this all the time, but shit is really starting to get real, so buckle your seatbelts, y'all. ;)

Enjoy <3

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Also I draw too and I made a Reddie comic based off the song 'Everybody Wants to Rule the World' by Tears For Fears, so here's the link if you wanna check it out: <https://pastel-reddie.tumblr.com/post/189170511347/tumblr-fucked-the-quality-but-heres-my-humble>

Richie's heart was a cold throbbing lump in his throat, body sickly warm as the beginnings of a hot, nervous sheen of sweat aired across his forehead.

His eyes were cast down at his white ceramic plate, and if he squinted enough, he thought he could see the harsh lines etching themselves into his face, the shadowy cast of the dark circles ringing his eyes like war wounds, and the grim horizon line of his smile. His stomach growled loudly, a bone-deep hungry scraping past his ribs and clawing at his gut. Richie ignored it, looking past the donut on his plate as he forced himself to look up and face the grisly circumstances falling over his morning; its shadow stretching out like a lazy cat. The Losers club was back, but not without the fragmented trauma that had so composed the most formative years of their childhood. Being seated around the table with the Losers, Richie came to realize that so too, with the undeniable love he had for them, came the startling realization of hatred.



It was convoluted and *twisted* and so odd that maybe you couldn't even call it hatred at all. But there was something there— something that rolled Richie's gut and fisted an iron glove around his lungs and made him want to vomit up his still-beating heart on the table for all to see.

The Losers club was back, and with it, the memories of the past Richie had tried so hard to bury with Eddie when the final beam of the Neibolt house came crashing down, collapsing into the earth. Buried— obscured and indistinguishable under that mounting rubble, left to rot and die right alongside the withering heart of Derry— the dank armpit of the world. But no, here it was in broad daylight, as blaringly obvious as a lark's call; shrill and sharp across the summer sky. Like a fucking tapestry hung across the wall, stitched from the aching constrictive strings connecting the Losers to Derry, each thread indifferent to the bloodshed, to the nightmares.

*Some fucking highschool reunion* , Richie thought sourly, biting into his donut like he was eating the entire goddamn world.

“Ed,” Beverly said softly, eyebrows knitting together. She was nursing a cup of coffee, and her hands, Richie noticed, were trembling around the blue ceramic base. “Can you tell us what exactly you saw?”

“No.” Richie looked up, raising his brows. Eddie was quick to elaborate, “I mean, I *can*. I will. I just...I don't know how to explain it. It's all so...fuzzy.”

“W-W-Well anything you can tuh-tell us will help,” Bill said softly.

“It’s okay, honey, take your time,” Beverly soothed. And then she was laying her hand atop his own, a searing coil of envy pitting in Richie’s stomach.

“Y-Y-Yeah, t-t-take your time E-Eh-Eddie. We can wait.”

A chorus of agreement echoed out like a sonar, and Richie could practically feel the red glare of his anger beam hotly across his faze, breath sharp and saliva bitter as he swallowed thickly.

“We love you, Eddie,” Ben said softly, “all of us.”

It was so easy, all of it. Mike, so headstrong and sure. Mike who stayed behind for twenty seven years because he made an oath. Because, above all else, he loved six people, even if they couldn’t remember his face, or his voice, or the way all those years ago, how they had loved him too.

Beverly, who had been deprived of any semblance of true, genuine, selfless love her entire life, and yet, had so much to give. Beverly who would bum you a smoke in the same breath she would chastise you for it. Because she cared, and she would let you squeeze her hand until it went purple, let you bury your face in her blouse until your tears left a tacky trail across her shoulders, and emerge from it all loving you all the same.

Ben— so sweet and genuine. Ben, who used the same kindness that used to get him beat up to heal others. Ben, who was alone for all his life, and who swore to never let anyone feel that way themselves, never again, not if he had any say in it. Ben, who was not only a

master of romance— but all kinds of love. Who unashamedly voiced his feelings so clearly, so honestly.

Bill, their leader. Still the same Big Bill they'd follow through hellfire, even after all those years. The same Bill Richie remembered, a proud, easy grin plastered across his face as he raced to beat the Devil, summer sun a warm halo around him as he cast his eyes towards the sky. Bill, who *always* knew what to do.

And then there was Richie. And Eddie— perfect, amazing Eddie. And the underlying promise of *RichieAndEddie*. And there he was, staring at his ceramic plate as the man he loved trembled two feet away. And he was *mad*.

Because how could he compare to that?

He would never have the right words at the right time, or the courage to touch Eddie, never mind the privilege of loving him. What was failure to provide something meaningful but another ripe opportunity to be inevitably, forgotten?

“Okay,” Eddie said finally, with the reluctant, but firm resolve of a man staring down the loaded barrel of a gun.

He scratched a hand over his chin, a slight scratching sound emanating from where his blunt fingernails itched the skin. There was a slight five-o-clock shadow developing across his cheeks, and Richie regarded it with a kind of tentative interest.

*I guess he can grow facial hair after all.*

“Stan...he was in a bath.”

A sickly warm wave of nausea crashed over Richie. Suddenly, he wasn't so hungry anymore. He regarded his forgotten donut with a look of disinterest, and with a bitter swallow, he pushed his plate away with the bone of his knuckles.

“T-Th-The,” Bill choked out, stuttering more now than ever. Richie trained a curious eye on him. He hadn't heard him stutter this much since they were kids, right after Georgie died, tripping clumsily over his words, near-unintelligible altogether in between blubbering sobs.

“*The* bath,” Eddie said gravely, looking like he tasted something foul.

The room was filled with a thick silence for a minute, the kind that wrapped its clammy palm tightly around your throat and seeped in through your pores, weighing down your body like liquid cement.

“*Jesus Christ* ,” Mike breathed, scratching his head and leaning heavily into his palm.

Bill scrubbed a hand over his face, cupping them over the bridge of his nose, sharp worry-lines digging into his forehead. Richie followed his blank stare to the window across the room, where a small bluebird peered curiously at them, cocking its head almost playfully.

*What the fuck are you looking at?* Richie thought sourly, and *God*, he must really be going crazy, because he could have sworn he saw some semblance of stark annoyance flit across those tiny black eyes. The kind you'd expect to be regarded with after making someone the butt of an unfunny joke, or the way you would look at someone who was talking jovially out of their ass.

Richie would know; he had been on the receiving end of both of them for the majority of his life.

He tried not to let his mind wander to the persistent coos a certain Jewish joy had called shrilly up to the trees almost thirty summers past.

*"You're crazy, Stanley. It's not going to fucking work,"* Richie had muttered that hot August afternoon, shouldering the curly-haired boy's khaki book bag as he brought his hands to his mouth and let out another determined whistle.

*"It will too,"* he had insisted, squinting disapprovingly at Richie, harsher words brimming on his tongue but making a swift grave in the back of his throat as that familiar, characteristic timidity clutched him like a monkey clambering at his back.

*"No offence, Stan, but if I was a bird and I heard that, I would fly the other way."*

*Stan just looked over at Richie, mouth pressed into a thin, almost prim*

*line. He shrugged, perfectly manicured fingers smoothing down his blue dress shirt, ironed to a creaseless state.*

*“And if I was a bird, I would shit on your head.”*

Richie had howled that day, louder and more obnoxiously than he ever had. Shock value was funny, it always was. Nobody needed to tell him that, it presented itself clear as day across Eddie’s face every time he made a joke about Mrs. K. But there was something about Stanley Uris’s break from that prissy resolve of his that had Richie keeling over, slapping his scraped and bruised knees, where Eddie had meticulously plastered Band-Aids across the purple skin a few days before. They had gotten gross at that point— soggy and limp from shower steam and the general assault of whatever disgusting substances Richie managed to get covered in on a daily basis. A thin ring of dirt nibbled at the edges, where a tacky layer of glue resided, and underneath it, a fast-growing tan-line. Eddie would be appalled. He could practically hear the lectures surely going to be donned upon him, and it did nothing if not fuel his bubbling glee, grinning as he jostled Stan.

*“Yowch! Stan the Man gets off a good one!” he crowed, cheeks flushed with that special kind of euphoria for the mundane that only comes with childhood. And then, because he was feeling particularly jovial, he slipped into a British Governor’s Voice, twiddling an imaginary mustache that failed to grow over the thin layer of peach fuzz barely grazing his upper lip.*

*“Good one, ol’ chap! Yah gots potential, mate!”*

Stan had just rolled his eyes, straightening the cuffs of his shirt and bringing his hands back up to his face. *“I hope if the birds come, they*

*poop on you,” he said calmly, almost dreamily.*

*“Awe, Staniel. And here I was thinking you didn’t love me.”*

He remembered getting pinned with that look— mildly annoyed, but falling short a few inches. Like he couldn’t be bothered to fully commit to it. In that warm summer day, Stanley had cupped his hands around his mouth once again, and as the sun filtered over the Barrens, a soft cooing sound began to echo.

Looking back on it, it really had been the perfect—

*—Day.”*

“Huh?” Richie said intelligently, Eddie frowning at him from across the table.

He sighed, “I said , I wonder how long he’s been down there,” he fiddled with his hands, “I know what it’s like...down in that place.”

He looked off into the distance, as if he felt exposed under Richie’s imploring gaze, “It’s like...the weeks go by like days.”

*“What else did you see?”* Beverly almost whispered, her tea having gone cold in the mug, but holding it in a white-knuckle grip regardless.

Richie noticed she had extracted her hand from Eddie's, which had now begun to shake on the table, fingers trembling. The urge to reach out was deafening.

Richie tightened his grip around his coffee mug and brought the bitter taste to his mouth.

"There...his dad was there," Eddie offered, eyebrows drawn in confusion, "they were at the...the Jewish church."

"T-T-The synagogue," Bill finished, gaze unmoving on Eddie's face.

"Yeah," he almost whispered, "there was a service too."

"His B-B-Bat Mitzvah," Bill blurted out, eyes wide.

"Yeah."

For a minute, nobody said anything, just staring blankly down at their plates, and it felt all too reminiscent of their reconvening at the Jade of the Orient. Richie followed Bill's eyes, and realized he was staring at an empty seat at the side of the table.

*Stan.*



Richie looked between Eddie and the rest of the Losers, all exchanging secretive glances, faces equally as grim. He was waiting for the punchline, for the other shoe to drop. But this was no joke, and the only laughter it could spark was the sobbing kind, so manic you couldn't help but tilt your head to the sky and let an unnatural howl tear from your chest.

*No* , was all he could think, followed closely by the insistent mantra of, *not again*.

"Look, I don't know what...what you think you saw," he managed, rather ungracefully, the Losers turning to look at him as he stumbled over his words. He flushed red, "but it's just a dream, okay! Just because Eddie's having some weird nightmares doesn't mean anything, right?"

His tone was frantic, pleading. He knew it. He could hear it in the crack of his voice, the way it waned on the last syllable like a caving roof reaching towards the soft earth.

A prayer, a *plead*. One last chance to keep this— this wonderful warm purgatory where Eddie was alive, and as repressed as Richie was, that was *enough*. Because Eddie was alive. He was *here* and drinking from Richie's cup and sitting in his house in *his* pyjamas, and goddammit, he was *alive*, and that was *all that mattered*.

*Please* , Richie thought, *please*.

And then Beverly broke the silence:

“I saw something too.”

“M-Muh-Me too,” Bill said softly.

“I...saw something,” Ben offered, looking somewhat mortified as he cast his eyes to a dusty corner of the room.

“Mike, can you tell them—“ Richie turned to look at him, face falling flat as he saw the tentative raise of Mike’s big, strong hand, worn to callouses from years of farm work.

“I saw it too.”

Richie rubbed the bridge of his nose, making no move to catch the glasses slipping into his lap.

“Jesus Christ.”

---

“After we came back from dinner...I went up to my suite. I started running a bath, I—“ Bill sighed, rubbing his eyes, “I wanted to relax, you know?”

When nobody responded, he continued.

“My w-w-wrists...they were still bandaged up, from the b-b-broken window. They wouldn’t s-s-stop bleeding. So, I got in the bath, and I f-f-felt this...vision, almost. Not quite a m-muh-memory, but close enough, I g-g-guess. It was S-S-Stan...” he took in a shaky breath, “I saw him die.”

Beverly gasped, Ben pulling her in closer against his broad chest, looking at Bill with sympathetic eyes while Mike patted his back in some attempt to placate the bumbling hysteria spilling over in ragged breaths.

“And then...w-w-when I looked d-d-down, the water was red. *B-B-Blood* red.”

For a moment, there was silence. Too much of it— the kind that makes your ears ring, just to compensate for the lack of sound, that low hum you only notice when at your wit’s end, like the charred and disappearing butt of a cigarette as the flame rips through the foil.

And then Beverly said, “I saw blood too.”

When Richie looked up at her blearily, glasses a slight weight in his palm, her lower lip was wobbling, her hand trembling under Ben’s, engagement ring winking in the light.

“It was like when I was a kid ,” she breathed, a sob catching on the back of her throat, “I—I had a shower, around the same time as you, Bill. There was so much *blood*,” she whispered, trembling.

“I was there too,” Ben said, squeezing her hand, “it happened.”

“You actually saw the blood?” Richie asked, watching his eyes flick nervously.

“Well...no. But I think it’s like when we were kids. How the adults couldn’t see the blood on Beverly’s walls. But we...we could.”

“Well, Haystack, we’re all adults, if you haven’t noticed, so how would that work?” Richie shot back, throwing his hands up before scrubbing at his eyes again, pushing his glasses back on his face.

He was being cruel, he knew it, but he couldn’t bring himself to care in that moment, let alone stop.

“I’m not saying it’s the exact same thing, Richie. All I’m saying is it’s similar. Maybe it’s targeting our own traumas, and that’s why no one else can see them.”

“This is bullshit. This is bullshit !” Richie concluded, standing up, moving to push his seat back. But Ben caught his hand, cementing him in place.

"No. This is how It got us the first time— by turning us against each other! We need to stick together."

Richie trembled in his grip, jaw exploding with tension as he grit down on his teeth, the metallic taste of blood flooding his mouth.

Ben looked at him softly, "We're all going through the same thing."

And that was all it took before Richie was yanking his wrist out of Ben's grip, slamming his fist down on the table, the sound echoing throughout the room.

"No!" he yelled, shaking. "It's not the same thing!"

"R-R-Richie—"

" *Don't* ," he threatened, finger trembling where it pointer accusatorially at him.

But Bill didn't back down, instead, rising up to him like they had all those years ago, right after Neibolt.

*"You couldn't save him, but you can still save yourself."*

*"N-N-No, t-t-take it back!"*

Richie looked into his wide eyes, the dark circles under them, the desperate look on his face. The same kind he recognized in himself in the mirror, after Eddie's death, before he had collided it with his fist, shattering the glass with a deafening crash.

*"You're scared, and we all are. But take it back!"*

Richie looked over at the Losers, practically cowering into themselves. He looked at Eddie, the still-healing wound gashed into his face. The thick bandages he knew were wrapped tightly around his torso, where his own blood and entrails had been threatening to spill out of just a month before.

*"Eddie was nearly killed!"*

*No. Never again.*

"You're not the only one who's lost people, Rich," Bill said, voice as fine as glass, as low as a bleak foghorn over a midnight horizon, black waves lapping at the gravelly shore.

"No," Richie said softly, eyes stinging. He hungered to swipe the brimming tears away with the back of his hand, but he could seem to move it from his side, where it hung down like a lead balloon. "No, Bill. I'm not the only one who's lost people," he looked over at Eddie, who was unreadable under his gaze, and then looked back at Bill with a scowl, "but I'm the one who won't let it happen again."

“L-Luh-Listen to yourself!” Bill cried, jaw tightening as anger exploded out of him like a rogue firecracker, sparking fury burning into Richie’s skin as he shoved him once, roughly. “Do you want S-S-Stan to die down there alone, *again?*”

“No! But this is just like the first time when Beverly went missing and you made me go back into Neibolt! And then when Mike called us all back and you made us go there again! Stop...looping me into your shit,” he clenched his fists, “I’m done, okay?! No more, Bill!”

“Richie—“ Beverly started.

He rounded on her, and there must have been something fiery blazing behind his eyes, because she stumbled back a little in surprise.

“No, Bev. Look, I don’t know what you guys think you saw, but all of this makes perfect sense. We were trapped in some diseased sewers for over a day with no sleep, fought some fucking *killer clown* ...post-traumatic stress, that’s all it is .”

He turned to Bill, “You,” he pointed, “your wrists were bleeding when you got into the bath. Those cuts were deep, do you even know how much blood you lost? Enough to start seeing shit.”

“So you’re saying we’re *making it up?*” Beverly said hotly.

“No! I’m saying we’re fucking traumatized, okay?! I can barely take a piss without thinking of those fucking sewers!” he shook his head, neck aching from the tightly drawn tension in his shoulders. He looked at Eddie, “And you, you almost died! You really wanna be traipsing around in that place again? You just got out!”

“No, Rich, I don’t!” he yelled, “But Stanley’s our friend, and Losers stick together.”

“Eddie, you have a hole in your face and another one through your chest. You’re not in any condition to be doing that.”

“And what’s that, huh, Rich? What’s my condition?” Eddie’s gaze was steely, threatened.

“Weak, Eddie!” he yelled, voice faltering, and God, he hated how much it sounded like a sob, “You’re weak!”

Richie regretted his words at the best of times, but never this quickly. The sinking feeling registered before the last syllable even left his mouth, and as he stared in horror at Eddie’s face, he could see years worth of trauma flit over his eyes.

*“Eddie-bear, you can’t go outside, you’ll get hurt.”*

*“Eddie-bear, you can’t run with your friends. You have asthma remember?”*



*“Eddie-bear, don’t go, you’re too fragile to be on your own!”*

Each memory punched an accusatory finger to his chest, each one punctuating, *weak, weak, weak.*

Eddie raised a shaky hand up near his face, and it trembled in the air for a second before dropping it.

“Fuck you,” he said, pushing his chair back and storming out of the house with a slam of the door.

“I—“ Richie said, turning around, where all the Losers were boring holes into the side of his face. *“Forget it,”* he muttered, stalking off to his room.

As he lay nestled in his childhood bed, frowning into his pillow like a prepubescent boy stood up at the school dance, he heard the conversation continue in the kitchen.

“It’s okay, man,” Mike said.

There was a heavy breath, like someone trying to suck in some oxygen through the heaviness weighing on their chest. Then a garbled noise that almost sounded like a cut off sob.

Richie raised his head from the pillow slightly, listening with piqued interest.

“I just...I can’t leave him again. I can’t—“

And then Bill was sobbing, blubbering incoherently, the sound slightly muffled as the Losers, Richie assumed, pulled him into a tight hug.

There was something in the way Bill said it— full of fear, that trepidation, that remorse Richie knew like the back of his hand, that caused it to dawn on him. That Bill spoke about Stan the same way he spoke about Eddie.

*Oh* , Richie thought, and as the sobs continued down the hall, he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Bill and Richie really need to start their own 'I'm stupidly in love with my best friend and poorly repressing it' support group. Honestly, these guys (gays) are USELESS.

Stenbrough fans, how you feeling? :o

What about you, Reddies? ;)

Feel free to let me know your thoughts down below, and if you want to join a tumblr groupchat with me and some other readers, let me know! I'll add you and we can talk about Reddie together :D

Thank you for reading, and brace yourselves for the

next chapter, because...well, you'll see. ;)

### 30. Chapter Thirty

*Eddie was running. Eddie was shoeless, Eddie was fuming, and Eddie was downright blatantly lost, but goddammit, he was running .*

His legs ached, joints creaking like an old clock radio whirring to life. A hot, searing pain was seated in his hamstrings, and following footfall on his tired soles screamed at his mind to slow down. Each breath was punched out of him, drawn raggedly out throwing burning lungs. A shrill, wheezy sound had begun to emit from the back of his throat— a high-pitched whistling noise Richie called his ‘tea-kettle’ sound, ( *“Someone turn Eddie off, he’s reached the boil!”*)

Through a haze of exhaustion, Eddie felt some kind of sheer, unstoppable wonder. Eddie was in triumphant pain.

His face split into a beaming grin and he ran even faster.

The long grass slashed across his legs like a whip coming down on a disobedient child as he cut across the lawn, leaving fine red scratch marks along his shins that would surely burn like a cult brand later, but he couldn’t bring himself to care as he heard voices in the distance. It was vague shouting somewhere up ahead— a familiar boisterous squawk, and in the blinding white euphoria that pooled behind his eyes, he nearly collided with Richie.

“Woah there, Eds,” he started, placing a steadying hand on either of Eddie’s shoulders. “Who’s after you? The Devil?”

“Nah,” Eddie huffed out, unable to contain the face-splitting grin tugging painfully at his cheeks. He let out a breath— equal parts exasperation at Richie as it was a desperate bid for air. Finally, he stated, “That’s Bill.”

Richie had laughed, quieter under the overlooming threat that fell over them like the dark tapestry of night encroaching on the blazing sun of day.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” he frowned, looking curiously at Eddie’s face, as if he’s grown a third eye between the ridge of his brows, relaxed and light, the usual frowning crease etched into it softened.

He could feel himself flush under the imploring look, and his chest heaving under Richie’s soft touch— that gentle contact.

“Yeah,” he breathed, laughing a little. It was wispy and light and more like a prayer, or the earnest confession of a dying man.

Richie just smiled down at him, hands seeming to hesitate to leave their grip on the sun-flushed skin of Eddie’s forearms, right below the hemline of his red polo shirt's sleeves. His fingers twitched against the warm thrum of his pulse, battering wildly in his chest, as if they were thinking of slipping down and grasping Eddie’s trembling hands in his own. Richie’s blue eyes sparkled like sunlight refracting off the sea behind those thick-framed glasses, and all coherent thoughts in Eddie’s mind in that moment narrowed down to a single sentiment:

*He really wanted to kiss Richie right now.*

“Penny for your thoughts?” Richie laughed, but it sounded wrong—nervous. Flat, unlike the bubbling confusion pooling and churning in the pit of Eddie’s stomach.

*A tug at his hand.*

“Watcha thinkin of, Eds?”

*You .*

Eddie looked down at his feet, the normally pristine white toes of his sneakers winking up at him with fresh scuff-marks, the sight glorious, and even through the nauseating haze of confusion, he couldn’t help but to feel a swell of pride.

“You with me, Eds?” Richie said softly, “What’s on your mind?”

He looked up into those eyes, more honest and open than they’d ever been. The hand not grasping Eddie’s wrist clambered up to bump his glasses back up the bridge of his nose— a nervous tic.

*You , he wanted to say, i t’s always you, Rich,*

Instead, he said, “Don’t call me Eds,” and extracted his hand from Richie’s own.

He heard footsteps approaching, and they turned to see Bill coming down the street, a pained-looking Stan and a contemplative Mike close in tow. Bill himself looked somber, like a man resigned as he stares down the barrel of a gun in an enemy's hand, knowing it will be the bullet to paint his brains across the walls like a Rorschach inkblot. Richie's smile faltered, and then crumpled as he drew in close to himself, the group coming together as a unit as they stand at the foot of the curb.

"Richie," Eddie said carefully, peering up at him, "I think I'm losing my mind."

Richie peered down at him, face noncommittal, and Eddie didn't miss the almost disappointed haze that fogged over his eyes.

"That makes two of us," he sighed, looking at the house. "Lucky for you, where we're going, I don't think you'll need it."

Eddie shivered, and saw Richie hardly containing the urge to do the same, drumming a nervous beat on the side of his leg.

*Richie* , he wanted to say, wanted to reach up and touch his face, to comfort him. It was so easy, like a knee-jerk reaction, or a forgotten language re-learned and now invading his mind like a Nazi soldier, spilling out his mouth in all the wrong ways and bleeding through his touch, his gaze.

*Richie.*

And then Bill looked over at them, and he was pulling away.

“Yeah,” Eddie gulped, eyes glued to the horizon, “yeah.”

They were stood in front of the Neibolt house, looking at the rotted wood, the teetering shingles, the drowned flower beds, the crumpled door.

“Hey, Eddie,” came the obligatory quip, flatter, as though forced out through a disheartened tongue, “that looks like your mom’s vagina.”

Eddie bit his lip, hands trembling where they were held in vise-like grip at his sides. He shook his head.

“Shut up, Richie.”

*And then, like a secret password, the gaping black maw of the Neibolt house opened to them, drawing them in like a moth to a flame, and swallowing them whole.*

---

Eddie frowned at the broken rubble littering the dead lawn, grass as yellow as sand and as dry as straw, weathered to its grave over the years and pushed flat against the ground like the cheek of a bullying victim from the assault of careless squatter’s feet in trying times.



Vaguely, he could make out the crude remains of the old picketed trellis, and the jagged criss-crossed underbelly of the porch smashed to pieces and sticking out of the rotted earth like half-hearted stakes. He remembered the diseased hand that had shot out of it all those years ago, the bursting green veins, the feverish waxy sheen of the skin, the bubbling red lesions filling like helium balloons. The horrendous, claw-like nails that hadn't seen the inside of nail clippers in decades, looking almost torn out of the bloodied cuticles like capsized ships speared through a wasted shore. Joints creaking like an old door, barely held on by rusted, unoiled hinges, knuckles ripping through the withering skin, bones locked and severe and seemingly stuck in a claw-like grip, reaching up towards Eddie to close around his throat—

*“How bout a blowjob, Eddie?”*

The atrophying fingers clamping like a vise around his shoulder, the rot so close, its foul stench seeping through his nostrils as he gags drily through a choked-off inhale, salty with the start of startled tears.

The leper smiling at him, knowing, cruel.

*“It won't do you any good to run, Eddie.”*

*A hand squeezing around his arm, branding fingerprints into his skin, crushing the bone beneath it and sending hot rivulets of pain down the joint. That facing boring down at him, so close, so—*

“Ah!” Eddie yelled, jumping back like he’d been burned.

At his legs, a small child peered up at him, too young to be close to teenagehood, and yet too old to be a toddler. Somewhere in that sweet spot, in the awkward crosshairs of impending puberty, a growing foul tongue in the glorious works.

“I *said* , catch my ball, mister!” the voice spoke up at him indignantly.

Visions of the leper still played in the forefront of his mind, and he shivered, blinking them away, letting out an intelligent, “Huh?”

The kid sighed, the sound long and suffering, like a lawyer going through a divorce, or a man who decided he had already seen too much of the world. Eddie half expected to see a cigarette dangling from his lips.

“My *baseball*?” he drawled, giving it a pointed toss in the air, catching it in a gloved hand, the leathered palm of it worn and soft with age.

A few feet away, a small gaggle of prepubescent boys stared at him owlishly, their small eyes unblinking over the dipped visor of their caps.

“Oh,” he said, “sorry.”

“Yeah,” the boy said, giving him a suspicious look and taking a hesitant step back. He skittered off towards the other kids again, but not before deftly swivelling his head back and saying, “that was lame, dude.”

Eddie frowned down at his reflection, rippling in the small puddle at the curb, run-off from a nearby rogue garden hose, draining into the sewers.

*He watched his face distort in the water, and as his expression peered bleakly up at him, he brought his foot down—*

—and let the cool water of the Barrens wash over his shin. Distantly, rampant thoughts of cholera and staph infections urged at his mind, but he dismissed them like a busy father banishing their child from their study.

“So, Haystack,” Richie drawled, from the long grasses where he lay, a long piece of straw nestled in the crook of his mouth where he nursed a cigarette a mere fifteen minutes before. “This dam gonna work or what?”

Ben tottered clumsily over the bank, worn denim sweeping over his legs in boyband-like flares, nearly black with the water sloshing over them. They were the kind of jeans Eddie’s mom would refer to as ‘husky boy’ pants. Eddie thought they were kind of cool.

“Yeah, it’ll work,” he said resolutely, letting his chubby palms rest on

the soft silhouette of his sweater, which Ben wore even through the summer. Eddie could see the a bead of hot, itchy sweat careening down his flushed face, and he flexed the ball of his own foot with mild interest. The new kid was interesting, alright.

“How do you even know how to make these things?” Richie asked, absentmindedly flipping his small red lighter open and closed, a small blue flame spluttering out from the metal tip.

Ben picked up a long stick, absentmindedly refining the crude blueprint he’d etched into the mud. He shrugged, “I have a lot of Erector sets.”

Richie just hummed, seemingly satisfied with the response, much to Ben’s obvious relief, who let out a suppressed sigh and let his shoulders slump relaxed. Eddie supposed he could understand that. To an outsider, Richie’s unapologetic, insistent inquisitions about nearly everyone and everything could be jarring, imploring even. Richie was like a dog— loyal as anything, mighty good company, but sometimes he went barking up the wrong tree.

Eddie looked at him with a quiet kind of awe as he lazed in the sun, stretched out like a cat, a piece of straw dangling from his mouth where a cigarette had been moments earlier.

“Get a good look, Eds,” he drawled, not opening his eyes, “while I’m still young and beautiful.”

Eddie blushed for reasons he wouldn’t understand until nearly thirty years later, but Stan was significantly less inhibited in his response.

“You mean this is how you look when you’re beautiful?” he deadpanned, “Well, you’re gonna be one butt-ugly adult then, Richie.”

Like a bird shot from the sky or a rogue missile plummeting towards the ground in a nose-dive, Richie’s resolve fell. Slapping his knees, he let out an indignant-sounding squawk Eddie supposed was meant to be a laugh.

“Stan gets off a good one! Yowza, folks!”

“Y-Y-You know w-what they s-suh-say,” Bill giggled, looking at an exasperated Stan.

“What,” Stan said, eyes narrowed.

“T-T-The o-old ones are w-wuh-wiser.”

The Losers dissolved into fits of laughter, Stan rolling his eyes good-naturedly, long-since accustomed to being on the receiving end of many jokes comparing him to a senior citizen. Eddie found himself, in that pale sunlight, looking at his friends with a sense of fondness, adoration. These are the people who cared about him. These were the people who got him.

*These were the people who loved him.*

When the laughter settled down into a comfortable silence, as it often was, Richie was the first one to break it.

“Say, Molly Ringwald. Got any more smokes?”

Beverly rolled her eyes, stretching idly in the afternoon sun. Ben’s eyes were glued to her face and Eddie noticed his gaze lingered for just a beat too long before turning his attention back to the dam, a bright blush colouring his cheeks.

“Sorry, I gave my last one to someone who doesn’t call me dumb nicknames,” she said coolly, no real bite behind her words.

Richie gasped, throwing a hand to his chest, “Eddie, I didn’t know you smoked!”

Eddie, who never ceased to fall victim to Richie’s many traps, screwed his face up in indignation, “I don’t!” he squeaked, earning a boisterous laugh from Richie.

“No, but seriously, do you actually have a cig?” Richie repeated, fanning himself like a fair maiden, “I think I’m going through withdrawal. *Ah say I’m goin’ throughs withdRA-WAHL, Miss Scawatt!*”

Bill shook his head, “I s-suh-swear those t-t-things are just m-muh-making you more annoying.”

“Nah, Big Bill,” Richie said, pulling himself to his feet and slapping him on the back just on the verge of too hard, “that’s all natural.”

“How lucky for us,” Stan quipped, rewinding his watch with perfectly manicured fingers. He had lost it down in the Barrens last week and practically had a coronary.

“I really am out of smokes,” Beverly said glumly, knocking the toes of her sneakers together and digging her heel into the ground, “ran out.”

“W-Wuh-Well we can a-always get s-suh-some,” Bill offered, and everyone turned to look at him.

At the best of times, the Losers would turn to Bill like sunflowers to the sun, and it’s common law that if someone offers to buy beer or smokes, you listen. So the effect doubled tenfold and Eddie was sure Bill could pronounce himself as God and the Losers would nod along.

Bill, however, just stuttered.

“I- I m-m-mean. The owner knows m-muh-me. I buy smokes for my dad sometimes, he won’t t-t-think any d-different.”

“What if he asks your dad about it?” Mike frowned, and Eddie could see Richie send him a warning look.

“I doubt my d-d-dad really c-cares anymore,” Bill said gloomily, and the Losers recognized exactly what he meant, and what went dutifully unsaid:

*I doubt he cares since Georgie died.*

The Losers just nodded, and as they rose to their feet, Richie slung an arm around Eddie, bringing him in in a loose headlock up against his chest.

“Aw, Rich!” he protested, squirming out of his grip.

Richie just laughed and slung his arm snugly around his shoulder.

“You’re gonna get lung cancer one day,” Eddie said sombrely, and he must have looked awfully concerned, because Richie just softened and leaned over to gently ruffle Eddie’s hair.

“Whaddya say, Eds? We can even get a rocket pop on the way there!”

Eddie frowned, conceding, “Okay, but you’re paying!”

Richie just laughed and laughed, head tilted towards the sky with an easy grin, “You drive a hard bargain, but fine.”



“Damn right,” he frowned, “and don’t call me Eds!”

Elbows knocking together, he looked up at the side of Richie’s face, who wiggled his eyebrows playfully until Eddie was blushing and looking away with a nervous laugh. The warmth flooding his chest was almost unbearable, and along with it, the violent onslaught of what could be pansily described as ‘butterflies.’

So, Eddie did the only thing he could think of. Pressing the flat of his palm to Richie’s arm, he looked back at him with a grin, “Tag, you’re it.”

Richie stilled, letting out a surprised bark, eyes glittering behind his thick-framed glasses. “Oh, you’re on, Spaghetti Man!”

“Don’t call me that!” Eddie protested, and then they were taking off down the fields, clouds racing above them, the sun still promisingly high in the sky.

Eddie cast his face to the summer warmth and he laughed. He laughed and laughed, and as Richie’s laugh mingled with his own, he thought it might just be the best thing he’d ever heard.

Still, even as he grinned, he couldn’t rid of the urging voice in his head:

*It won't do you any good to run, Eddie.*

---

Eddie saw the metallic object winking at him in the brambles, and before he could think about landmines or discarded druggie needles or how God-knows-how-many feet have walked over this exact spot, he was kneeling down to unearth it.

Richie's lighter— faded and pilling with age, but Richie's lighter alright. Haphazard streaks tainted the once-sleek metal, where it had been rained on particularly hard over the years. Rich paid a pretty penny for it back then, two hundred pennies to be exact, nearly half his week's allowance. He'd never forget the smug, self-satisfied look on Richie's face that day as he came bopping down the Quarry, lighter slung around his neck on a chain like a shark tooth, a blinding grin on his face.

Eddie sighed, *maybe some things were better left in the past.*

With one last look over the horizon, a brief stand-off with the setting sun, Eddie tucked the lighter into his pocket, and began the trek back.

---

When he walked up the empty driveway of Richie's house, Bill was already waiting on the porch, leaning over the guardrails sheltering a particularly pathetic garden bed, with a beer in hand.

“Hey,” Eddie said, walking up the steps.

“Hey,” Bill greeted back.

They stayed like that in silence for a minute, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It never had been for Eddie, not with Bill. No matter how silly Eddie was being, Bill seldom mentioned it unless he wanted him to. Bill understood, and Eddie thought, just maybe, he just got it because sometimes, Bill could be silly too.

“You gonna share?” he said finally, nodding at the half-drunk amber bottle in his hand, condensation dripping down the neck.

Bill laughed quietly, “Y-Y-You not afraid of juh-juh-germs anymore, E-Eddie?”

Eddie just took the bottle from him, taking a long swig and looking honestly over the horizon, “There are worse things than germs, Big Bill.”

“Yeah,” Bill said, looking at him a little curiously. He turned his gaze back across the street, following Eddie's eyes, “yeah.”

“The others,” Bill said after a few minutes, looking at him again, “t-t-they all went b-b-back to the townhouses. As it t-t-turns out, nobody likes s-suh-sleeping on the ground.”

“Richie too?” Eddie asked, a little too quickly, and he berated himself internally.

*You're mad at him, Eddie. Remember? You better not let yourself forget, because if you do, you'll leave room for worse feelings to come up.*

Eddie fumbled for his medicine, medicine that was no longer in his fannypack, which was no longer holstered to his waist.

*Fuck .*

“Yeah, R-Ruh-Richie too,” Bill said simply, as if were common sense. He paused before adding, “I don’t really think he wants to be alone right now.”

Eddie scoffed, taking another drink.

“No, I’m serious, Eddie,” Bill said, and from his stern gaze, Eddie could tell he was. “Richie’s been in Derry by himself for almost a month...cut him a little slack.”

“Bill, I don’t want to hear—wait,” Eddie blanched, mouth going dry, “Richie stayed in Derry?”

Bill sighed, taking the bottle from Eddie’s hand, which had gone limp

by his side, and took a swig, face screwing up, as if debating whether to elaborate, and then taking another sip.

“M-Me, Bev, Ben, Mike...we all went home,” he bit his lip, “obviously, w-w-we were all t-t-torn up over what happened, but...some of us m-muh-more t-t-than others.”

Eddie’s resolve was weak— cowering like a kicked puppy and flattened by Bill’s words. *Come on, Eddie*, he chastised. But still, his chest bloomed with warmth.”

“If he cared so much, he wouldn’t be leaving Stan down there to die,” he said, a little unfairly.

Bill just sighed, the sound long and drawn out, and when Eddie turned to look at him, he was startled to see the weary dark circles ringing his eyes, the thin lines etched into his face. The immortal Big Bill— tossed around haphazardly in the winds of time. They all were, really, like tumbleweeds blowing through a ghost town— lost, small, and driven by forces they couldn’t even begin to understand.

“Richie was being an asshole, Eddie. Believe me, I know,” he scrubbed a hand over his chin, the slight scratch of stubble echoing into the night, “but it hasn’t been easy on him,” he looked at Eddie, “he lost two of his best friends in under a week, of course he’s messed up about it.”

*No, no, Eddie*, he whispered to himself, *no!*

“Are you excusing what he did?” he yelled, that relentless noise inside of him exploding like a time bomb. His hands were trembling, the beer resting on the edge of the railing toppling over with a deafening crash. All of Eddie’s remaining resolve shattering into a million pieces. He was shaking like an epileptic.

“No, Eddie, I’m not! But I’m saying he had his reasons!” Bill shouted back, and he found himself cowering under him like he did in Neibolt.

“Then why didn’t he say anything to Bev, huh? Or Ben?” Eddie said hysterically, “Because I’m weak? Because I’m *fragile and stupid and need to be protected*—“

“He’s acting like that because he *cares!*” Bill yelled.

And just like that, like summer’s longest day fading into the pale twilight of winter, like porcelain shattering irreparably on the ground, Eddie’s resolve crumbled. Crumbled, like sand between his fingers, like dead leaves beneath his feet.

Eddie’s heart stopped in his chest, and for a moment, he was a dead man.

*The leper* , Eddie thought frantically, *it got me.*

*It won’t do you any good to run, Eddie.*

And then, like the beat after a soundless scream, like a faulty radiator finally kicking in, like nerves sparking alive at the first touch of ice, it started beating again, tripping over each beat like a madman, like his own heart was trying to outrun his past, outrun the desires lying within it. Eddie wanted to scream, wanted to cry for his mother, or Myra. Wanted to take his medication, placebos be damned, and he wanted to leave Derry and never return.

Instead, he stare unmoving at the ground.

Bill sighed, clamping a hand down on his shoulder, “C-C-Come on,” he said, pulling Eddie against his side and leading them down the steps, “let’s go m-muh-meet the others.”

Eddie said nothing the entire drive, but as he lay his head on the window, he couldn’t shake Bill’s words from his mind.

*He’s acting like that because he cares.*

---

Eddie was standing in front of Richie’s door. Eddie was standing in front of Richie’s door, and he hardly heart the three curt knocks he bashed into the mahogany or the following reluctant footsteps, because his heart was trying to claw its way out of his throat, and it took all his willpower not to vomit it up at his own feet.

Eddie was standing on shaky legs, like a young doe who hadn't quite learned to walk yet, and he was trembling all over. He was trembling and surely he would soon drop dead on the dirty hotel room floors and that would be it. It would make a headline, maybe two, oh, who was he kidding, he'd be lucky to get a page in the obituaries at the back of an old newspaper, christened by the coffee stain of someone living and breathing and entirely not him.

Eddie was panicking and Eddie was getting ready to leave, and then Richie was in front of him.

*The brunet boy in the doorway is glaring at you because he is trying to kill you, and you deserve this, you do, and you know this, and you are ready to die in this hallway because you wanted to touch his hands and lips and this means your life is over anyway.*

"Can I help you?" Richie scoffed, looking down at him. His eyes were red-rimmed. Distantly, through that fog, Eddie wondered if he'd been crying.

His hair was damp and hanging in loose curls over his forehead. His white shirt clung to his skin, droplets of water careening down his strong arms. He was angry— so *angry*. He was hurt.

Eddie felt his heart pulse in his throat.

*Mommy, you were right, you were right and you knew it, I'm sick and no medication can cure me, Mommy, and that's the worst part of it all. No amount of camphor or aspirin can fix this, no placebo can stop the fever in my body or the pounding of my heart when I look at him.*



Richie raised an eyebrow, ducking his head down to look at his face, "Eddie?"

*It won't do you any good to run, Eddie.*

Richie's face softened, "Eddie?"

Bill's words rung in his ears :

*He acts like that because he cares.*

Staring up at him with wide eyes, Eddie surged forward and kissed him.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

is it even a reddie fanfic if there isn't richard siken in it? that little bit at the end with richie in the doorway (unfortunately) wasn't me waxing poetry, it's a rendition of an excerpt from 'crush,' by richard siken (amazing poetry by the way). also the reason b-b-bill didn't stutter at the end was because he was giving a speech of sorts, like how he was able to do that at neibolt.

also!!! after 30 chapters they FINALLY kiss. i swear i didn't intend for it to take that long, but here we are, over 70,000 words in, jesus christ. it's all gonna be

fast moving from here on out because shit. is. going.  
DOWNNN.

if you wanna scream at me you can do so in the  
comments below or on tumblr @pastel-reddie ;)

## 31. Chapter Thirty One

Richie woke up to an empty bed and a pounding headache.

*Blessed be the words you first utter when you wake in the morning, for they are the honey that will drip from your lips, and the nectar that will sweeten your day,* Richie remembered reading somewhere.

“Urgh,” he said intelligently, followed by a particularly poignant, “fuck.”

Yes, the world was moved by Richie’s declarations that morning, but nothing was more transformative than the pale stucco ceiling of the hotel room, swimming in his glazed eyes in perfect synchronicity with his churning stomach, which gave a pointed lurch as he leaned over the bed.

“Gah,” Richie gagged drily, the tickly feeling crawling up his throat subsiding as his lips wet with a rogue trail of drool. “Ungh.”

He rolled up to a sitting position, shivering as the cool air hit his bare chest, which was littered with an impressive spattering of purplish-red bruises that trailed a line from his collarbone to the hem of his boxers. He groaned into his hands, knuckles kneading his browbone, sighing at the temporary respite it brought. He lumbered up, plucking his now-rumpled white shirt off the pilly carpet, where it had been splayed across like roadkill. He winced as his knees gave an alarmingly loud ‘pop.’

“Jesus Christ, I’m way too fucking old for this shit,” he muttered.

*Too old for what? his mind prodded, too old to be picking your own clothes off a filthy hotel room carpet? Too old to be waking up hungover like some college student?*

*What is it, Richie?* it asked him, so saccharine sweet, like the dew-drop glistening web of a spider, *what’s eating you alive?*

As he languidly made his way towards the small en-suite, the ramblings continued.

*The sun is shining, all your friends are downstairs...Eddie is downstairs, it cooed, everything just the way you wanted it, isn’t that right, Richie?”*

He stared at the mirror, arms planted on either side of the slick marble counter. He looked troubled—the cataclysmic path his mind was trailing illustrated in the thin lines etched across his skin, just under his eyes. *But it isn’t what you wanted, was it? Because Eddie kissed you. He kissed you with nothing to preface it, no declaration of love, no emotion but stone cold fear and the bubblings of hysteria. He dragged his lips across your neck in a searing path, eyes screwed shut, as if he couldn’t bear to look at you. Why wouldn’t he look at you? And when you woke up in the morning, his side of the mattress was cold, like it echoed the phantom touch that you feel all over your own skin now. You wake up in a dirty hotel room all alone and you collect your things like some kind of cheap whore and that should be enough, it really should, but it wasn’t and it isn’t because no matter how much you try to hide it no matter how much you try to change it, it always meant more than that to you, didn’t it, Richie, didn’t it, Richie—*

Richie threw himself under the cold assault of the shower stream, nerves sparking alive as he gave a ragged gasp, leaning against the tiled walls, head bracketing between his arms as his hair plastered across his forehead.

*i leave tomorrow morning*, he decided, one more day and I'm out of here...for good.

---

Richie walked downstairs fifteen minutes later feeling physically, a little more like a person.

His hair had dried soft and was beginning to curl around his ears, his jaw was smooth and nearly free of stubble. He had a new shirt clinging to his skin, still wet from the shower. But his mind was still furled in on itself inside, sulking like a petulant child. Richie rubbed his throbbing temples and flopped down at the table, groaning muffledly into his arms. Distantly, he could hear the whirr of a kettle — high pitched and shrill, and it worked like a dog-whistle, pawing at his ears and sending a deadly glance at whoever had set it off.

“Can you *please* keep it down?” he bitched at them— the offender in question, just so happening to be Bev.

“Jesus, Rich. Who pissed in your coffee this morning?”

He just gave a half-hearted grunt, scrubbing his hands over his face.

“Nobody, yet,” she answered, placing a filled mug in front of him. When he rose to the smell of espresso, Beverly was looking down at him pointedly, “but keep it up and I can change that.”

“Ah yes, Ms. Marsh. I would be honoured to drink from the golden stream that is your pis—“

Bill grimaced as he walked in, shaking his head, “I d-d-don’t even w-wuh-wanna know.”

Beverly just rolled her eyes, taking a seat next to him, “How do you manage to be so disgusting so early in the morning?”

He took a sip of his coffee, nearly moaning into the cup. He let his shoulders slump as he felt the caffeine work its magic, sharp daggers of the hangover ebbing away like a low tide. He smiled over the rim of his mug.

“It’s a gift.”

---

If being terrorized by an oddly prejudiced killer clown, repressing his feelings and the better half of his memories for twenty seven years, only to return and get stabbed by the same aforementioned killer clown the second he returned to his hometown— wasn’t enough to convince Eddie that maybe, if there was such a thing as a God, that it

wasn't smiling down at him, then stepping foot into the kitchen that morning was the proverbial straw that broke the proverbial camel's back.

There, sitting in his seat, was Richard-Fucking-Tozier, curls matted across his forehead and shirt clinging to his chest like a second skin.

"What the fuck are you doing in my seat?" he asked, recognizing how juvenile he sounded.

So what if Eddie reverted to the equivalent of a prissy eight year old every time he was faced with some distasteful emotion? That was nobody's business, and at that, Eddie primly decided as he marched over to the table, it wasn't his own either.

"I didn't know there was assigned seating," Richie challenged, leaning back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. He looked at Eddie pointedly behind his dark glasses, "I don't see a sign."

Eddie grit his teeth, "Why would there need to be a sign if there was a verbal agreement?"

"I didn't hear any verbal agreement. I never heard, *'hey, Richie! This is my seat, you can never sit here, in this specific spot, ever, or I'm going to bitch about it.'*"

Eddie was fuming, and said with some kind of scary mix of anger and sugar-coated enthusiasm, "Hey, Richie! This is my seat, you can

never sit here, in this specific spot, ever, or I'm going to bitch about it."

"Well, that's a shame, Eds. You see, there's this other verbal agreement, you might've heard it. 'First come, first serve'? But hey, there's an open seat right on Ben's lap."

Eddie just scowled at him— what else could he do? Richie was being an asshole, and Eddie totally deserved it, he knew that. But the funny thing is, so often in life, we are the cruellest to others when we are the most unforgiving of ourselves.

Biting his tongue, Eddie huffed and sat down in the chair next to Bill.

"You're seriously passing up an opportunity to sit on that lap?" Richie asked, "Scooch over, Benjamin, I'm coming in."

Ben just rolled his eyes, but humoured him with a laugh.

*No, don't encourage him!* Eddie wanted to scream.

"Do you ever stop being an idiot for one single second?" he said instead.

Vague hurt seemed to flit over Richie's eyes for a split second, but he just replied coolly, "No. Maybe I should've stole some of the tranquilizer from Mrs. K when she had rabies."



Unbelievable . *Unbelievable* . Well, no, completely believable. But sometimes ‘unbelievable’ meant ‘*I’d really rather not believe it.*’ Either way, *unbelievable*—still, even after it all, Richie was cracking jokes.

“My mom didn’t have fucking rabies—“

“Well—“

“You know, you’d think after all these years, you’d come up with some cleverer jokes.”

“And you’d think you would grow taller than four feet since we were twelve, but life is full of surprises, isn’t it, Eds?”

“I’m five-foot-fucking-nine, asshole. That’s the average male height in most parts of the world—“

Eddie should stop talking, he knew it. Richie’s eyes were cold and betrayed— this clearly wasn’t their usual playful banter. But it was too late, his mouth was like a wild stallion, fleeing the barriers and charging recklessly ahead, paying no mind to the wreckage it left in its wake.

Eddie’s face, along with his vision, went red.

“And don’t call me Eds!” he shouted, rounding on Richie.

It was different this time, not the usual half-hearted shake of his head and poorly-hid smile of amusement tugging at his lips. No, it was scared, angry. Like a declaration of sorts.

For a minute, there was silence; just Richie’s wide eyes eyes boring into his own and the quiet clink of silverware as someone stirred their coffee.

“You guys are arguing like kids again,” Mike said, trying for a smile. But it was strained, and as he looked between the two of them, Richie knew he understood something between them— whatever it was, had changed.

“Yeah,” Beverly laughed, still sounding a little sleep-drunk. Or— the smell of liqueur on her breath suggested, regular drunk. The next words came with a solemn sort of recognition, like she was speaking from experience. “Or like you slept with each other and really regretted it.”

And everyone— Mike, Ben, Bev...they all laughed. Because it was funny, wasn’t it, the idea that Richie and Eddie would be queers? Because, even after killer clowns from outer space and drainpipes that regularly belched out blood, there were still things that transcended absurdity. And the idea that Eddie would feel something towards Richie, well, that was the greatest joke yet.

*Having any good chucks, Eds?*

Oh, so many, Rich. So many goddamn chucks. Shotgunning with my best friend and pretending like it was the smoke that ached my lungs that night and made me gasp into my inhaler, not the haze in your eyes and the way our lips almost touched. And then leaving, LEAVING, Rich, how you left even though you promised you wouldn't, and sure, college would have come soon enough, encroaching on that pale summer sunlight like the dark, dismal breath of fall. But you didn't have to LEAVE. But you did, and when you looked at me like that, with those blue eyes and you told me you remembered me and we said we would, that we would keep in touch but we knew, we KNEW— And I, I ran. I ran like hell the second my mom died— she died right by the door, isn't that funny, Rich? She was so big they had to break down the goddamn front door to get her body. Isn't that funny? Isn't it? She died and I had a chance to run, to leave her, those placebos, and that goddamn clown behind for good. And I ran, I ran alright, ran all the way to New York and right into Myra's arms.

I married my mother! Ha! Isn't that a kicker? But you know what the worst part is? I think, I really do think, Rich, that no matter how fast you run, no matter how much distance you put between yourself and your past, it will always come around to find you. Because something in us changed that day we went into the Neibolt house, something changed and you know it— we all know it. Stan maybe knew it best of all, and that's why he did what he did, because something cold and dark and twisted built a nest for itself in our hearts that day, Richie, and the thing about this world, the crazy thing is that at the end of the day, everything comes on right back home.

And how can you live with that? Knowing that you can run as far as you can and you can play house as much as you want, but in the end, in that bitter end of it all, your demons will be right there, waiting. Look at me, Rich! I'm living on a livewire and teetering on the brink. You were wrong, I'm not brave at all, and you know what's worse? I did all this always hoping you would come and save me. Isn't that pathetic? I came back to Derry and I did nothing and then I died, Rich! I DIED! When I woke up in

*those sewers, all I could think about was you. And now you're here and I'm scared and no less the coward I was twenty seven years ago, isn't that funny, Richie? Some DAMN GOOD CHUCKS.*

He looked at Richie. Richie looked at him. Bev's eyes pingponged between the two of them and the prying eyes of everyone else followed suit.

*Stop looking at me like that!* Eddie wanted to yell.

Bev's mouth dropped, and Eddie could see, Eddie could see through a white hot burn of shame that she knew.

Bill walked through the door, completely oblivious of the thick cold tension that had settled over the room, he held up a takeout bag and smiled.

"Who w-w-wants breakfast?"

---

Look- Richie did not sleep with Eddie.

And as he kicked a stray rock, sending in skittering into the Kenduskeag below, he couldn't decide if that was better or worse. Of course, fucking in a clumsy, frantic, rageful fury wasn't what Richie had in mind when he'd dreamt of having Eddie to himself, but then

again, he'd never imagined their first kiss would feel more like a punch either. He pressed his knuckles against his mouth absentmindedly. They were sore, kiss-bitten, and sure enough, a tender purple bruise ached just under the surface.

*Fucking Eddie*, he thought sourly.

He looked about three feet ahead, where Eddie was bitching to Bill about the canal water soaking through the bottom of his jeans. His face was mostly obscured by the angle, but Richie could faintly make out the distinctive line etched between his eyebrows and the look of utter contempt on his lips.

His lower stomach twinged slightly, like the bassy hum of a tuning fork. *Fucking Eddie*, his traitorous mind thought.

And like all unwanted thoughts, it took free rein of Richie's head like an untamed stallion. Thoughts of the way Eddie had pounced on him the night before flooded his mind, stiflingly close and searing hot in their familiarity. Richie had been drinking. He'd driven with the other Losers to the townhouses and barely idled downstairs with the others before retiring to his room with a bottle of whisky and half a life's worth of stale shame in hand. It was about ten-thirty when the knock came, when Richie reluctantly opened the door.

And then Eddie was there, he discerned through an increasingly fuzzy memory. Eddie was there, and he, he—

*He grabbed ahold of Richie's shirt collar and yanked him down into a bruising kiss. Richie gasped against his mouth, mumbling out something*

*like, “Woah, Eds!” or an eloquent, “What the fuck?” but it was swallowed by Eddie’s mouth as he bit down harshly on Richie’s lower lip and startled, Richie let him inside.*

The door slamming shut behind him. Eddie kissing him back, away from the wall, the backs of Richie’s knees hitting the bed. Eddie climbing atop the mattress thoughtlessly, never once breaking contact with Richie’s lips as he groped at him, fingers gripping the back of his shirt as he tugged. They broke apart with a wet sound, a string of saliva connected between their mouths. Richie shivered as Eddie rucked up the hem of his shirt, warm hands roaming, exploring the skin of his torso with fervent motions.

“Wait, Eddie, Eddie—“ he panted as Eddie pulled the shirt over his head, palms making broad strokes across his chest, nipples hardened, sensitive peaks on the topography of his body as the cool air hit his skin.

*But his protests were swallowed by his own moan as Eddie started kissing down his neck.*

Richie shook his head, rousing himself out of the memory as his head gave a pointed, dull throb. The words echoed in his head *You’ve got something in your past, and it’s chasing you, Richie. You better sort that shit out.*

“You keeping up back there, Richie?” Bill called from up ahead.

Richie watched Eddie’s shoulders hitch, and then straighten, as if he was making a painstaking effort not to meet his gaze. He shook his

head, trudging faster through the water.

“Yeah.”

*As they walked towards the gaping entrance of the sewers, Richie closed his eyes and let the darkness swallow him whole.*

---

*Eddie was beginning to regret this.*

To be fair— he had made countless stupid decisions over the past twenty four hours, over the past twenty seven years. But this, he thought to himself as sewage water sloshed wetly over his ankle, this had to take the cake. What was he thinking? He was wading through millions of gallons of whatever passed under Derry with fresh wounds still open on his skin. He was walking into the place meant to be his grave hardly three days after leaving the cistern for the second — and what he swore would be the last— time. Even without the killer clown— which still couldn't be completely ruled out— there were very real, very dangerous forces at play here. The concrete walls were crumbling, metal pipes groaning and creaking as water passed through the old mechanism, the whole structure trembling as Derry furiously tried to bury the past— and whatever evil lived there. It was an architect's nightmare and a spelunker's wet dream.

*It's like those creature features Rich used to drag us to , Eddie thought nauseously, except when it's happening to you, you don't see the things that lurk in the dark.*

The water lapped agreeably at his legs.

*Greywater* , he remembered grimly.

*Have you ever heard of a staph infection?* his mind babbled, *have you—*

*—Ever heard of a staph infection?”*

Richie grinned at him in the dark, rebelliously crooked teeth baring themselves to him, eyes twinkling and huge under those coke-bottle glasses. Eddie— as he so often did in times of such unrest, began to take inventory of the hazards.

Richie’s cargo shorts doing nothing to stop the filth from splattering across his legs and into the open scrapes across his knees? Check. The holes in the soles of his sneakers he refuses to fix? Check. Richie’s carelessness could often make him an unknowing danger to himself, and, he thought grimly as he waved a stick at him threateningly, sewage wicking off the tip, a danger to Eddie.

“Oh, I’ll show you a staph infection!”

Eddie yelped as the cool water hit his skin, going red as he yelled a bit hysterically, “That is so not funny, Richie! Have you ever heard of listeria? Do you even know how many germs are in that water!”

Stan shook his head, mouth turned into a prissy line. It was the



closest show of allyship Eddie could hope for from him when covered in piss.

“That’s not—

—Funny,” Ben finished, rousing Eddie from his thoughts. He jumped a little, startling the water as it swam at his feet.

“Huh?”

Bill clapped him once on the back, a firm pressure just above his hip, “W-W-Woah. E-Easy there, E-E-Eddie.”

“Just...” Ben said, “We keep coming down here, no matter how hard we try to stay away. It’s like...it’s like we have no control over it.” He paused thoughtfully, “It’s kind of funny.”

Eddie didn’t have much of a response to that, and judging off the neutral expressions of the rest of the Losers, nobody would have said much of anything, the words simply left to die in the darkness like everything else.

Except, Richie could never be quiet.

“Well, I don’t know about you...” he drawled, low and resigned. It reminded Eddie of those corrupt detectives slaving over a case file with a cigarette dangling from their lips. Sure enough, just a few feet

behind him, he could hear Richie flicking a lighter on and off. “But I’m not laughing.”

His tone was harsh— a tone seldom used on nice, gentle boys such as Ben.

The flame spluttered to life again, bathing his face in a pale yellow light. Eddie could see how life had had its way with him in the lines etched across his face, but he was perhaps most unnerved by the absence of a smile on his face. Eddie always assumed Richie would go to his grave with a chuckle barely dying his throat, a grin tugging violently at either side of his face, glassy eyes winking in the morning sun, like they were giving one last good chuck.

*How can we be so different yet exactly the same?* Eddie wondered dizzily, *after all this time...*

“Yeah,” Ben said. *Flick. Flick. Flick.* “Me either.”

Silence. And then Richie’s voice, quieter than Eddie had ever heard it.

“We’re really doing this, huh?”

Eddie’s heart lurched in his chest.

*No, he wanted to say, no, Rich, we’re not going back there, are you*

*crazy? You've had a lot of stupid ideas over the years, like putting itching powder in Henry Bowers' shoes, or buying beer with Went's ID, or that time you made us swim in the Quarry in the rain and we were all sick for a week after, but Richie, this has got to be your stupidest one yet. We'll pack up our luggage and leave this shithole of a town and it'll ache for awhile but soon enough we'll be forgetting again, and the pain will be senseless. Isn't it always? But that will be fine, Rich, because hell, I'd give it all up to live a life believing that dead is dead and nightmares are just nightmares. I'd give it all up to forget.*

*Stanley, I love you, I really do, but I can't go back in there again, I just can't,* Eddie thought, and he swore, somehow, he felt that Stan understood.

He ached for Bill to pat his back like he used to do in moments of such uncertainty. He ached to hear him say, so soft and sure:

*"It's a-alright, Eh-Eddie. It's o-okay."*

Instead, he stopped, lower lip stiffened as he gazed at Eddie, and then the rest of the Losers in turn. They watched, horrifically complacent as he gave his ministrations.

*"If I was Stan...I'd want us to find me."*

And just like that, like the camel's back breaking, or like Betty Ripsom's other shoe coming to a drop, they were moving again, Bill's word as good as law. Even paralyzed in his fear, the cool, clammy grip of terror squeezing his lungs, he found himself walking through the water, trudging on ahead. It was horrifying, he thought, how

easily they all fell back into their roles. Like they couldn't help but be the people their childhoods had made them out to be. That playground rules maybe governed the whims and ways of life more of the world than previously thought. That maybe, Eddie swallowed, somewhere in that great tapestry of life, a few threads had come loose, tangling and binding them all inextricably to their past.

"E-Eh-Eddie," Bill said, "s-since you s-s-saw what happened in the d-d-dream...you should lead."

The Losers looked at him expectantly.

*The Navigator*, he thought grimly, of course.

And like the last puzzle piece falling into place, as the dust settled—Eddie knew with a morbid certainty that this was what he was meant to do, and in that reconciliation of the life he knew and the death he was perhaps destined for, he found a sense of internal strength he'd never known he was capable of.

*I'm going to get my friends, and I'm going to get the hell out of here for good*, he thought.

Nodding slowly, Eddie moved to the front of the group. And after taking one last look at the bright halo of summer light shining just beyond the concrete entrance, he took a step forward and began to lead his friends through the darkness.

**Author's Note:**

This will be a continued slowburn fic, so be sure to subscribe to get notifications when a new chapter is released! Kudos and comments are greatly appreciated, I love to hear your feedback! You can send me Reddie requests over on tumblr @pastelreddie, so be sure to follow for exclusive Reddie content. :)